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Exploring Identity Change and Communities of Practice among  
Long Term Home Educating Parents

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

Home education, defined in this study as the full-time education of children in and around the home by their committed parents or guardians, is a growing educational option in both the US and the UK. It is a tremendous challenge for parents because it is a constantly lived intellectual and emotionally absorbing experience concerning the future of their children. Most research into home education focuses on children: this project explores it from the perspective of parents. Data was collected through fifty preliminary questionnaires and thirty-four in-depth interviews. Surprisingly, financial concerns, career curtailment and 'time for one's self' did not emerge as significant. However, parents had an enormous task to face, to think about styles and approaches to education. Being in a small minority group, moreover one that challenged established educational practice, also left parents feeling marginalised. The research describes how parents adapt to their new role and how this changes them as individuals. A theoretical framework which deals with changes both with regard to learning and identity is Wenger's (1998) Community of Practice which analyses learning through practice in a social setting and connects these practices to identity formation. The community of practice is defined according to its joint enterprise (common goal), mutual engagement (meeting up with others to pursue the common goal) and shared repertoire (memories, stories and jokes of the community). The theory was modified in order to apply it not only to the paradigmatic neighbourhood home education groups but also to virtual home education networks and even to the exceptional cases where parents

relate through the home education constellation alone. It is further proposed that, without realising it, the experience of home educating is interwoven with broader self-development; parents do not only educate their children but themselves as well, including becoming more politically aware. They become different people, not only with regard to a radical change in their educational views but also experiencing a profound change of identity.



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This work is dedicated in loving memory to

Esther and Raymond Safran, who are much missed.

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# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

### *My experience as a home educator*

When my son, Sam (a pseudonym), was about three years old, he and I used to visit the library once a week and get out a huge pile of books. We would read them all several times together. When he reached about four years old, I began to get 'early readers' from the library. We looked at them together for about two weeks and, at my instigation as he seemed 'to be ready' to learn to read, I began consciously to teach him. After a few painful days he said 'reading is boring'. I immediately stopped trying to teach him to read but continued reading with him. I was afraid that this experience might have put him off reading forever. About six months later, after he had received a book as a present, I heard him reading it. I knew he was reading the book as it was new to him. This experience, with hindsight, was very important. My child had, in his own way and in his own time, taught himself one of the most important skills he would need for life and he learned it for himself.

When it was time for Sam to start school I began reading whatever I could to find out about alternative education and home education although there were not many books available at that time. The Moores (1989, 1989a) had written several books on the dangers of starting children in school too young and suggested eight years old as a good age to start school. There was also a book by Mullarney (1985) who educated her eleven children at home up to about the age of twelve. What struck me most about this book was that the



children (who were all adults by the time the book was written) represented a cross section of the community. Several were doing very well, several were not working including one with severe mental illness but the majority were fine and leading ordinary lives. This book showed me that a common prejudice (which I held at that time) is not true; that is that home education is only done to 'hothouse' children by pushing them in an area in which they show great potential. I realised that one can home educate for different reasons. The most influential book I read was John Holt's *Teach Your Own* (1981) which was so radical and eye opening that it convinced me, along with my experience with Sam, to try home education. I contacted the UK national home education organisation *Education Otherwise* (EO) and was informed about the legal situation of home education in the UK.

My reason for choosing to home educate at the time was to allow Sam to enjoy his childhood. I felt home education could provide effective education due to the experience of Sam 'teaching' himself how to read. Holt described this type of self-learning: "children are by nature and from birth very curious about the world around them, and very energetic, resourceful, and competent in exploring it, finding out about it, and mastering it" (1981, p.46). I had a very important example of this when Sam learned to read without help from a teacher. This reasoning, coupled with the fact that I knew Sam could always go to school if home education did not work, gave me the courage to begin.

We began home educating on 6 September 1988. Despite earlier confidence, I was terrified that I was 'ruining' my child and this choice would not allow

him to fulfil his potential. My model for education was school so I thought I had to replicate this model of education at home. I also thought I had to teach subjects as they were taught in school, for example geography and physics. I was not interested in studying these subjects to the standard required for Sam to eventually pass exams, which I thought was required of a home educating parent. So on that first day, due to my panic, we went to the park to relax and play. We did bark rubbings of the various trees there, played in the playground and went to the cafe. Sam paid for our snack and checked the change. We came home and made a cake. When I thought about the day later I realised that in mainstream educational terms we had done an enormous amount of varied and interesting work without consciously planning it: art, biology, maths, chemistry, social and domestic skills. Nor does this list of subjects take into account our normal constant verbal interaction about all sorts of things or the enormous amount of reading Sam did continually through the day as he wanted. After realising this I felt better able to cope with what I then saw to be my new role as 'teacher'.

We began a regime of three academic subjects a morning plus violin practice. In the afternoons we would go out somewhere or do things at home. This schedule filled three days of the week. One day a week was spent with several other families doing a craft one of the parents had prepared and the other days in the week we would spend out with other home educating families.

It soon became apparent that our mornings at home were not going well. I often became impatient with Sam and at best we ended our sessions feeling



tired and slightly angry with each other while at worst I would be shouting and he would be in tears. This was not the educational structure that Holt (1981) had illustrated as possible at home. I had envisaged a self-motivated, creative joyful childhood for my children in which they would learn for themselves and, more importantly, in which they would develop themselves and gain self confidence. This was not the situation we had.

Sam had asked to learn to play the violin but practice was the low point of the day. I realised that most of the bad feeling stemmed from my own frustration at not knowing how to help Sam overcome problems with the violin. His teacher was immensely sympathetic and managed to support both of us, Sam in his struggle to play the violin and me in my struggle to help him. But despite the teacher's help violin practice was fraught. What I told myself was that I would stop practising with him for one month to see what would happen. What happened was that he did not practice very often, but he progressed at the same rate as he had when we practiced together. His playing continued to progress whether he practiced or not. This led me to dramatically change my views on education and 'practice'. And our relationship improved with the stress of practice gone.

Following this important lesson for *me* from our early disastrous experiments of trying to mimic schools at home, we dropped our rigorous schedule of academic subjects and workbooks. This was also due to the growing number of commitments outside the house. We did keep up with projects in subjects we were both interested in. This included doing a lot of charity work and

doing project work in the outside world as much as possible. But our new regime was led by Sam in terms of what he wanted to do and when and how he wanted to do it. Over the years I recognised in myself a process of change related to my view of education. I moved away from a style of education typified by the school system to a more child-led model of education where the child directs their own learning and the adult becomes a resource. (Safran, 2001) I found that many other parents, as home educators, had similar experiences.

As the years passed I realised that I had had to change many of my conceptions, preconceptions or misconceptions about my own life and the life I had envisaged for my children and myself, about how children learn and grow and about my future. I felt the children (Sam's sister joined him in home educating when she was old enough) lived their lives and did not feel (for some time) this style of education to be anything other than normal. Certainly, they did not see our concentration on child-led learning as unusual. However, having shifted my world view on many issues I also felt I had, in some ways, gained more from the home educating experience than the children. I was more confident in myself and my own learning abilities. I was more confident to challenge other mainstream mores in society, such as career expectations and felt secure enough to decide for myself about important matters such as health or childbirth. Home education was often difficult and brought numerous problems but it was also immensely rewarding when we were able to solve or work through the problems as a family. These rewards improved my confidence, which allowed me to take



other risks, for example in choosing, after extensive research, not to vaccinate the children. This again fed my confidence and so on. Further, through talking to other home educating parents I found I was not alone in my thinking and that some of these parents had travelled further down the road than I had in terms of the amount of risk and change they had dealt with. They became role models for me.

With the above background in mind, I have been and still am an active member of the home educating community, through founding and running a community centre for home educators for the past fifteen years. I edit an independent bi-monthly home education magazine and run an annual conference on home education as well as speaking and writing about home education regularly.

Having my life course and all that underpins it challenged and being able to cope with it made me much more confident about having chosen a different life course rather than travelling down a well worn one. It was these changes in my life, through the experience of home education, that led me to this topic of study, enquiring whether the home educating experience had affected other parents and if so, why and how it had affected them.



## *Background*

It is clear that my initial thrust for undertaking this project came from my personal experience with home education. While home education has been a positive experience for me, it is not the purpose of this thesis to argue for home education or to argue against mainstream styles of education and school. Moreover, I have tried not to be predisposed to any particular outcome for this study. I am also aware that my own experience and insights into home education, while obviously useful, can influence me, however much I try to remain neutral. This issue will be taken up later.

My experience of being a home educating parent raised issues which I thought were important and interesting enough to deserve serious study. The experience changed me and I wanted to know why this was the case, in what way it had changed me and if this was the same for other parents. I hoped to determine what impact home educating had on parents and decided to study those who were settled in this choice in the expectation that the effects on them would have time to emerge clearly. Home education will obviously have a major effect on parents' lives. Parents have to make the initial decision to home educate, deal with authorities, reorganise the family's lives to incorporate new schedules required, constantly explain and defend the decision as well as continually reflect on whether it is the right decision. They need to analyse and re-analyse what they are doing as a family and adjust as they go along, taking account of their children's development, shifts in their

interests, their own needs as parents and of other family members and so on. They may not have to meet externally imposed schedules or curricula or meet external educational requirements but they do have enormous responsibility as educators. While this can be liberating and inspiring, it could also be a burden for some parents and imposes its own requirements of commitment of time and energy and the necessity for parents to become 'teachers' in some sense of the word. This also means home educating parents are in the company of their children a good deal of the time. All of these factors may affect parents' relationship with their children. Parents face other issues. They may face difficulties financially or in career terms, in sacrificing time for themselves or friendships. Conversely, what, if any, benefits do parents find from home educating? Are there unseen advantages which outweigh the disadvantages or reduce them to being negligible? For example, were their children's good educational experiences enough to counteract any personal loss? How did parents make new friendships and gain help in order to successfully home educate? Further, and importantly, do parents themselves undergo some personal change or development as a result of home educating as it does not necessarily follow from the practice of home education that parents will be profoundly changed by the experience.

With these issues in mind the main research question for this study became: does the experience of long term home educating significantly affect parents, and if so, how? This led to the following sub questions:

1. What is the process by which home educating parents develop their practices?
2. What is the nature of home education that makes it so engaging for parents?
3. What is the nature of the relationship between the individual home educating parent and the wider world?

After much of the data had been gathered, preliminary questionnaires and the first set of nineteen interviews, it became clear that the experience of home education could affect parents at the level of identity and further questions were added to the last fifteen interviews to this end. Therefore an extension to the second research question was added; can the experience of home educating change parents at the level of identity and if so, why?

All the parents involved in this research have been home educating for more than three years, because these parents will have had time to fully experience being home educators and are more likely to be able to recognise and articulate the changes this has brought about in their lives.

Fifty questionnaires were conducted with parents in order to map out the effects of home educating. This was followed up with thirty-four in-depth interviews with parents from the UK and the US.



## *A Theoretical Framework*

Choosing a theoretical framework presented some difficulty and a number of alternatives were considered. This research began as a data led thesis with the central question being how, if at all, long-term home educating parents are affected by their choice. However, alongside this process was a search for a theoretical framework which would facilitate data analysis and interpretation. Several theories were examined.

With regard to the philosophy of education, this study is situated in the constructivist tradition. Following Kant, this paradigm assumes that the possibility of knowledge is not determined solely by our sensory experience (phenomena) (Runes, 1955; Carr, 2003) but is partly structured by the learner. The individual, the student, is central to the acquisition of knowledge. New knowledge is constructed on the basis of what the learner already knows (Geelan, 2006) by employing categories of thought such as space, time and causality. Further, knowledge is gained through practice in the world via dialogues and collaborations directed by the learner (Lauzon, 1999). The world-in-itself (noumena) is unknowable; what is known is an individual's construction of reality. This paradigm does not explicitly analyse constructions as taking place in the social or historical context, as changing throughout life and as much more than an individual matter. Therefore an additional theoretical framework was needed that would specifically address

adult development through practice both as an individual and as part of collective practice.

Life-span theory accounts for changes in behaviour throughout life, making it relevant to this research where the main thrust is to investigate changes in adults. Life-span theory is defined as “the study of constancy and change in behaviour throughout the life course from conception to death.” (Baltes, 1987, p.611) Development contains the old and lost parts of life that are no longer relevant for the organism as well as the new and creative parts, and all change can contain attributes either potentially beneficial or harmful to the individual. Development therefore is seen as ‘a set of pathways’ (Goodnow, 1999) continually opening new branches, whether one chooses to travel down them or not.

Life-span approach is an ‘orientation’ or attitude toward research, which this study accepts. In looking at change and development and by taking into consideration the context and consequences of life practice, change can be better understood. Having said this, the life-span approach does not offer the tools with which to understand the dynamics of shared or collective experience. While this study accepts the notion of a continuing adult life-span development, a further theoretical framework is needed to understand that development on a collective level.

The concept of a ‘developmental niche’ proposed by Super and Harkness (1986) was examined. They used the concept to analyse the development of children in Kenya and the US. They hold that “parent beliefs and values and



tight structure of the infant care together provide a niche in which the baby develops an emotional life” (1986, p.42). There are three components that are included in the concept: the physical and social settings the child lives in, the culturally regulated customs and child-rearing practices, and the beliefs or ‘ethnotheories’ of parents or others around them. Tesser (2002), developing Super and Harkness’ concept of ‘niche’, uses the concept as a way to understand the ‘self’ and its interaction with its surroundings. However, this approach, while important to this study and adding to the understanding of parents as influenced by their social and cultural settings, is emphasising the individual’s emotional and psychological relationship to their practice. It omits analysis of the social and cultural influences themselves.

Mezirow (1991) concentrates on the individual’s capacity for reflection and examines underlying beliefs, which are brought about through individual disorientation after some life event/s. This transforms an individual (McDonald, Cervero and Courtenay, 1999). While transformative learning tries to elucidate the relationship between our inner subjective self and our objective work, it emphasizes the subjective factors (Kovan and Dirkx, 2003) by concentrating on the importance of having meaning in one’s life. This study is also trying to elucidate this relationship but favours a theoretical framework that gives equal weight to both subjective and objective factors.

A theoretical framework that was able to cope with the objective social aspects and the subjective individual aspects at the same time as explaining the dynamic between the two, would have more explanatory power than a

framework that concentrated on one part of the dialectic. This study while using the tool of interviewing to address the individual at the psychological level also wants to address parents' objective situation, for example, that they have taken themselves out of the 'normal' life path. In addition, parents in this study learn to be home educators through some form of contact with a home education community, which needs to be included in the theoretical explanation of the situation of parents. Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice framework encompasses these factors and interprets learning as part of an ongoing relationship between the individual and their social context. It holds that learning affects adults both objectively through practice and subjectively through changes in the individuals themselves.

Home educating parents learn in an ad hoc manner through the daily lived practice of home education, sharing a situation with other home educators, and in some way, having contact with other home educators and being part of a home education community. This learning is situated in the activity of home educating. While this began as a data driven thesis, employing guided data collection, the analysis of the results became theory driven, using the Community of Practice framework in an effort to both test and extend this theoretical framework, while at the same time understanding and explaining the data obtained. After the first set of interviews it was decided to use a Community of Practice theoretical framework because it deals with learning in a specific social setting, in this case the home educating community, and

because it considers the individual, especially in terms of the change of identity which becoming a home educator might entail.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Home Education: an overview**

There are problems in giving an adequate definition of home education (Bielick, Chandler and Broughman, 1999; Rothermel, 2002 and 2004). For example, children may be out of school for varying lengths of time and then go to school, or those normally at school may be tutored at home for a variety of reasons, such as illness or exclusion. For the purpose of this study, a two part definition will be adopted. Home education is the firstly, ‘full-time education of children in and around the home by their parents or guardians’ and secondly, ‘where the parents are committed to their [children’s] education and home-educating’ (Petrie, 1998; Petrie, Windrass and Thomas, 1999). This definition highlights the elective nature of home education, as well as drawing attention to the commitment required by parents in taking this step.

Home education has always been legal in England and Wales and is enshrined in the 1996 Education Act which states that

the parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable a) to his age, ability and aptitude and b) to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise (The Education Act, 1996, England and Wales).

The 1996 Act directly replicates without change or debate the 1944 Education Act, which first encapsulated the right to home educate in UK law. It is this last phrase “or otherwise” that makes home education legal in England and Wales. While home education has been legal in the United States since 1993, each state has its own laws (Basham, 2001). Requirements vary from state to state as to the amount of monitoring and testing required by educational authorities in order to allow families to continue to home educate (Lines, 2000; Basham, 2001). In Europe and Australasia the legal situation varies but home education is almost always possible. In Australia and Canada the law varies between states and provinces but generally those who want to home educate are able to do so (Barratt-Peacock, 2003). In New Zealand registration is compulsory and some financial support is available from government (Harding, 2002). The law in many European countries makes home education difficult, if not illegal, as in Germany (Spiegler, 2003). It is still a growing phenomenon in western European countries such as France (Fandard and Nozarian, 2001), Ireland (Robbins, 2001) Germany (Spiegler, 2003), Norway (C. Beck, 2002 and 2006) Holland (Blok, 2003) and Iceland (Nilsson, 2004) with small but growing numbers in Eastern European countries such as Poland (Budajczak, 2004), Estonia (Leis, 2006) and Russia (Fladmoe and Kaprov, 2006).

When it comes to the practice of home education it is often assumed that it will involve following a school model of education with, for example, a curriculum set by governing bodies delivered in a certain time and place, using a particular pedagogical method and to a large number of children at



once, as it would be in a typical classroom. In fact, in law in the UK, it is education that is compulsory, not a particular model of education. The legal meaning of the phrase 'suitable education' was established in 1981 in the case *Harrison & Harrison v Stevenson*. The judge defined a "suitable education" as one that firstly prepares the child or children for life in modern civilised society, and secondly, enables them to achieve their full potential. (Reported as *Harrison & Harrison v Stevenson* (QB (DC) 729/81).

A parent choosing to home educate does not need to ask permission from any central government authority, their Local Authority (LA) or the school their child attended. The decision to home educate is the parents' alone. Once home educating, parents do not need to inform their LA or have regular contact with them. They do not need to have premises equipped to any particular standard, to adopt the National Curriculum, to match school age-specific standards or have any special qualifications. They do not need to make detailed plans in advance, observe school hours, days or terms, to have a fixed timetable, to produce examples of 'work' for inspection, nor to provide school-type peer group socialisation (Elective Home Education Legal Guidelines, 1999).

In England and Wales it is the duty of the LA to ensure that the law is complied with. How evidence of a 'suitable education' is presented is open to negotiation between the parents and the individual LA. LAs have no automatic right of inspection of the child, the home, or the child's progress. Parents may refuse a meeting in the home if they can offer an alternative way

of demonstrating that they are providing a suitable education, for example posting a statement of their educational philosophy to them or agreeing to a meeting at another venue (The Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007). The LA has powers to ask home educators informally for information about their child's education, and, if they have reason to believe that someone may not be educating suitably, to formally require the parents to convince them that the child is receiving some education within two weeks. Failure to do so may lead to prosecution and a school attendance order if they cannot show the court that they are fulfilling their statutory duty under section 7 of the Act. Further, LAs have been placed in a complex position because there is no legal requirement for parents to inform their LA that they are home educating their children (Petrie, 1998). LAs, in fact, only have a duty to take certain actions if it appears that *no* education is being provided for children. But they may not know children are being home educated, especially if the children have never been to school or the family has moved between authorities (Sec 437, The Education Act, 1996, England and Wales.)

The legal definition of a 'suitable education' accepts various approaches to education as legitimate. Although this is the case, many parents adopt a school-type model of education when beginning to home educate because this is the model they are most familiar with (Thomas, 1998). But there are a range of different possible approaches to home education, varying from the 'school at home' approach where the education is highly structured, formal and parent-led, to the utterly informal approach where the child is entirely in



control of their own education (Meighan 1984; Thomas, 1998). There are many variations and gradations between these two extremes. Over time a family can change their model of education. For some parents who are deciding whether or not to home educate, this may be a welcome freedom, for example, if they favour a particular pedagogy or have had a problem with the school-type model of education. But it may deter other parents from home educating because they feel worried about having to take decisions about education which, for them, is to enter unfamiliar territory.

The increase in interest in home education is reflected in the rising numbers of home educators. More and more families are choosing to home educate both in the UK (Fortune-Wood, 2005 and 2006; Arora, 2006) and the US (Cai, Reeve and Robinson, 2001; Princiotta and Bielick, 2006). Determining exactly how many children are being home educated in the UK is very difficult since, as we have seen, there is no legal requirement for home educating families to register with education authorities. Estimated numbers of home educators vary widely, from 84,000 children (Cook, 2002) to more recent estimates of 40,000 children (M. Fortune-Wood, 2005). Further, numbers of home educators known to their LAs also varies from about 6,000 (Petrie et al, 1999) to more recent estimates of about 12,000 (Fortune-Wood, 2006). Petrie et al (2002) on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills, tested the feasibility of establishing numbers of home educators in England, using a snowballing method, but found it wholly unsatisfactory. They concluded, at the time, that prevalence might be established through a question on the census. Since then, another feasibility study has also found

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that reliably ascertaining the numbers of home educators is not possible under the present legal situation (Hopwood, O'Neill, Castro and Hodgson, 2007).

In the US, despite the fact that most states require some form of notification of intent and type of home education, it is still very difficult to determine numbers (Lines, 2000). Again estimates vary, with as many as two million children said to be home educated, although this was judged to be an overestimation (Bauman, 2001). The National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) produced rigorous sample surveys over a number of years (Bielick et al, 1999) to try to discover the numbers of home educators. The NCES reported in 2006 that approximately 1.1 million students (2.2 percent of the school aged population) were home educated in 2003. This had risen, according to the report, from 850,000 (1.7 percent of school aged population) in 1999. Even allowing for error, this firstly represents a sizable portion of the school aged population and, secondly, shows a huge rise in numbers of children being home educated from 1999 to 2003. The implications of this rise are not lost on the US central government, as shown by the continued surveys of home education on a four year cycle.

Further evidence of the growth in numbers and normalisation of home education in the US (Aurini and Scott, 2005; Basham, Merrifield and Hepburn, 2007) is from the amount and type of popular home education literature available. A search on the internet brings up a plethora of books nearly all published in the US about home education. There are books

designed to help you begin to home educate such as *Homeschooling: Take a Deep Breath - You Can Do This!*, Bittner (2005) and *Mary Pride's Complete Guide to Getting started in Homeschooling*, Pride (2004), *Homeschooling for Dummies*, Kaufeld (2001) and *A Complete Idiot's Guide to Homeschooling*, Ransom (2001). (See Appendix 1 for more publications from the US about home education.)

In the UK, there also seems to have been a rise in numbers of home educators although the rise may not be as marked as the rate of increase in the US. A recent search on the internet under the term 'home education' reveals only two books first published in the UK in the last five years, *One-to-one: A Practical Guide to Learning at Home Age 0-11*, (Lewis and Lewis, 2003), which is designed to help parents home educate. There is also a practical guide to home education listed, *Educating Your Child at Home*, (Thomas and Lowe, 2002) which outlines different approaches to home education. While this search does not present an entirely accurate picture as, for example, Educational Heretics Press has published home education books during this period *Damage Limitation*, (Meighan, 2004), *The Face of Home-based Education Volume 1 and 2*, (M. Fortune-Wood, 2005 and 2006), *Can't Go, Won't Go* (Fortune-Wood, 2007) and most recently, *How Children Learn at Home* (Thomas and Pattison, 2008) it does reflect the size, influence and place of home education in the UK relative to the US. It is also true that in the UK in the last few years, home education has been accorded greater acceptance by mainstream society. Newspaper articles about the option are numerous and generally positive. For example, *Tree climbers wanted for a*



*new branch of learning*, The Telegraph, (Lusher, 2006) and *Class of their Own*, Nursery World (Spencer, 2006). There has also been a change in the type of article printed about home education, which describes everyday issues that home educators face rather than more general articles simply about home education as a viable educational option. Examples include an article about teachers looking to work, outside the traditional education environment, with home educating children (Kirkman, 2005), an article about home education being a part of a decision to lead a less consumerist lifestyle (McNulty, 2005) and an article about a fourteen year old turning down an animation job which mentions that he is home educated (BBC News, 2006).

The oldest national home educating organisation in the UK, *Education Otherwise* (EO), was formed in 1977 with the purpose of supporting home educators and helping them contact one another through a contact list and a bi-monthly newsletter. Another national organisation was formed in 1995 called *Home Education Advisory Service* (HEAS) which also provides a newsletter and contact list. There has also been a rise of local newsletters (such as *Home Educators Liberation Papers* and *Sussex Newsletter for Home Educators*), websites (such as [home-education.org.uk](http://home-education.org.uk) and [muddlepuddle.co.uk](http://muddlepuddle.co.uk)), internet lists (there are five in London alone) and independent home education magazines such as *Choice in Education* (edited by the writer) and *Home Education Journal*.



In the US, also in 1977, *Growing Without Schooling* (GWS) was founded by John Holt. GWS served similar needs to EO, producing a magazine which contained letters about various issues in home education and advertising home education events and a list of names of other home educators.

However, since its inception, the number of home education magazines has increased dramatically, as also seen with home educating books. There are various nationally distributed magazines, for example *Home Education Magazine*, *Lifelong Learning*, *The Old Schoolhouse* and local newsletters, such as *Texas Homeschoolers*, *Vermont Home Education Network* and *Connecticut Homeschool Newsletter*, which have taken the place of GWS which closed in 2001. Again the rise in availability of home education literature in the UK is less marked than that in the US.

The growth in home education will have implications for parents considering it as an option. Firstly, it will make home education easier to find out about, leading to more parents considering home education as a possibility for their family. Secondly, as home education becomes more mainstream, the decision will become more socially acceptable and support and resources will become more easily available (Stevens, 2003). Nevertheless, for the present, being an outsider can still cause problems with regard to personal risk, and with regard to relationships with family and friends who may find home education difficult to understand and accept. Parents are also putting their children in the position of being outsiders and are trusting that home education will be the right option for their children. However, with greater numbers of children being successfully home educated and many now into adulthood, parents are

increasingly being reassured that it is a viable option (Webb, 1999; Ray, 2004).

The reasons why a family begins to home educate will obviously influence their feelings about the enterprise. For example, if a family chooses to home educate because they are committed to a type of educational approach then they will see home education as a positive step. But if a family begins to home educate because their child is having trouble at school then they may see the step as a mark of failure for the family in that they and their child were not able to fit into the prevalent educational system and they may then be at a loss as to how to go forward.

### **Becoming a home educating parent**

When a family begins home educating their first port of call is often a neighbourhood home education group. They can find these groups through the internet or by contacting one of the national home education organisations, through informal networks of home educators or through word of mouth from a friend, relative or neighbour. Most neighbourhood groups are run in an ad hoc manner, meeting at a regular venue such as a church hall or a public place like a park or museum. The activities are planned by the families attending and what happens there depends on the interests, skills and commitment of parents themselves as well as the resources available in that area.



These neighbourhood home education groups can be very important to new home educating parents. They can help parents join the home education community and learn about styles of home education from parents who are experienced. While it seems that most parents attend a group of some sort for at least some of their home educating time, not all do. Nor can it be assumed (at least in my experience in the home education community and as shown from the data collected for this research) that parents will feel the need to find other home educators, even at the beginning of their home education experience. Some parents do not seem to need group support, preferring to find their own way.

As well as the newsletters, internet lists and neighbourhood home education groups, home educators can meet with other home educators at home education events. These may consist of annual camps or festivals such as Home Educators' Seaside Festival (Hes Fes). This is a week-long annual festival which provides many different activities such as music, dance, drama and crafts. There is also a four day home education conference within the festival consisting of guest speakers as well as workshops and seminars. As well as this huge event, there are other smaller camps and residential meetings throughout the year.

### **Classification of Home Educators**

Attempts have been made to describe the types of people who chose to home educate. It might be thought that home educators would include mostly 'alternative' families and there is some research supporting this. For



example, a recent study suggests that the average home educating family in the UK has more children than the average UK family (Fortune-Wood, 2006) and tends to breast feed their children longer (Rothermel, 2003) but in themselves these trends are not enough to classify home educating families as a 'type'. In fact, very little can be drawn from these results. They may only point to these families being child oriented.

Van Galen (1988, 1991) set out a twofold classification with her description of home educators falling into "two broad categories...ideologues and pedagogues" (1988, p.55). While acknowledging great differences within these categories, she describes ideologues as wanting "their children to learn a fundamentalist religious doctrine and a conservative political and social perspective" (1988, p.55). Pedagogues, on the other hand, are critical of how schools teach and "are highly independent and strive to take responsibility for their own lives. ...they share a respect for their children's intellect and creativity and a belief that children learn best when pedagogy taps into the child's innate desire to learn." (1988, p.55) The Ideologue stresses the set of beliefs to be taught and the Pedagogue stresses the approach to education.

This dual classification may be too simplistic. Further, the polarisation of these two sets of home educators into 'conservative' Ideologues and 'independent' Pedagogues might be seen as caricatures. This duality can have the effect of highlighting and sustaining the prejudices and myths arising from stereotyping home educating parents such as classifying home

educating families as white, middle class or highly religious (Marshall and Valle, 1996).

More recently, Stevens (2003) has categorised home educators in the US as 'believers' and 'inclusives'. These categories seem to mirror Van Galen's earlier dual definition, as 'believers' are "avowedly Christian" (Stevens, 2003, p.19) home educators. The 'inclusives' are a diverse group in comparison. This group includes many religious families from all different faiths as well as non-religious families, families who are interested in alternative life styles, alternative educational approaches or are just interested in their children being home educated for their own specific reasons. This latter group seems to encapsulate the problems of the classification of British home educators. As Fortune-Wood says of the UK home educating community, it "is notoriously difficult to categorise" (Fortune-Wood, 2005, p.3).

Omitted from these dual classifications is the fact that parents can also choose to home educate due to problems their children faced in school (Knowles, 1988; Gabb 2004). This can be due to a failure to thrive either psychologically or educationally or social problems, such as bullying or the parents' fear that their children may become bullies. Rothermel (2003), considering whether it is possible to classify the motives for home education, concluded that home educators may now be "too diverse a population ...to be neatly categorized" (2003, p.78). With the rise in numbers and greater recognition and acceptance, home education may have become attractive to families with a wide variety of backgrounds and views.



One of home education's earliest and most influential proponents of home education, both in the UK and US, was John Holt. In his series of publications it is possible to trace his transition from initial criticism of the school system to his final advocacy of home education. This can be seen from some of the titles of his books, for example, *How Children Fail* (1969) and *How Children Learn* (1970), *What Did I Do Monday?* (1970) and *The Underachieving School* (1972) to his last books, *Teach Your Own* (1981) and, published posthumously, *Learning All the Time* (1989). Holt had been influenced by the free school movement of the 1960s and early 70s represented by the writings of P. Goodman, such as *Growing Up Absurd* (1960), Postman and Weingartner (1971) and Illich (1971), by the experiences at different types of schools described by A. S. Neill (1961, 1966, 1967) and Dennison (1970), and by more general educational theorists such as John Dewey and Bertrand Russell.

Possibly because of the limited amount of academic research into the topic of home education, anecdotal literature has become relatively important. Much of the writing about home education is in the form of letters to home educating newsletters and in more recent times, e-mail lists and websites. The earliest books published about home education in the UK were written by home educating parents explaining their own situation, why they chose to home educate, how they went about it and to some extent proselytising about home education (Baker, 1961 (as Wilding) and 1964; Head, 1974). There were also early attempts at 'how to' books such as Jean Bendell's book



*School's Out* (1985) which describes her home educating journey with her daughters. While such books are important to home educators these publications do not try to critically analyse the home education experience.

### *Home education research*

There is little research into home education especially when compared to other educational models (Isenberg, 2002). In the UK, there have been studies on the effect home education may have on the children, their education and their social circumstances (Webb, 1989, 1990 and 1999; Lowden, 1994). Other studies have concentrated on styles of home education and their benefits (Thomas, 1998; Meighan, 1984a, 1984b, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2004; Meighan, and Siraj-Blatchford, 2003; Rivero, 2002). There have also been some studies on home education and the law (Petrie, 1992, 1995 and 2001; Kendall and Atkinson, 2006).

Perhaps due to the rise in numbers of home educators and growing awareness of the prominence of home education research in the US, the prevalence of research on home education in Britain has increased.

Rothermel's (2002) PhD study undertook a quantitative analysis based on a questionnaire survey completed by four hundred and nineteen home educating families, including one hundred and ninety-six assessments evaluating the psycho-social and academic development of home-educated children aged eleven years and under. She found that home educated

children, aged from four to six, compare favourably with their peers at school. Very recently another PhD has been awarded to Eddis (2007). Her work compares differences in attitudes between home educators and government officials in England and Wales with those of Florida, US.

Other studies have concentrated on the legal and social implications of home education (Monk, 2004; Gabb, 2004; Finbow, 2006), the type of support needed for home educating families (Arora, 2002, Fortune-Wood, 2006) and home educating children with special needs (Fortune-Wood, 2007; Arora, 2006). This recent rise in research is also reflected in the growing number of Masters dissertations about home education which have looked at why parents choose to home educate (Green, 2005), mathematics teaching in home education (Yusof, 2003), acceptance of home educated young people to university (Whitbread, 2003/4) and the relationship of members of EO to their aims as stated in its literature (Gillespie, 2004). Particularly interesting for this study is Robbins' (2001) Masters dissertation which addresses change as manifested in an individual and a group, concentrating on U. Beck's (1994) notion of 'reflexive' identities. Robbins assumes home educating parents are transformed into 'home educators' after some time of home educating and being with other home educators, but does not directly address if this necessarily happens, nor does he address the processes of how it can happen, the topic of this study.

There has been an attempt in the UK, through *Personalised Education Now* (PEN), to fund a long term, wide ranging British research project focusing on



the nature of home education today. The first volume of this research addresses issues of who home educates, why they chose to and how they do it (Fortune-Wood, 2005). The second volume looks at how the numbers of home educators are estimated and the support available for home educators and home educating children with special needs (Fortune-Wood, 2006). A third volume, in this study, focuses on children who refuse to go to school and their relationship to home education (M. Fortune-Wood, 2007).

There has been no research in the UK specifically about how home education affects parents, although some research, in the US, has looked into the typology of the families that home educate (Allie-Carson, 1990; Mayberry, Ray and Knowles, 1992), why parents chose to home educate (Gray, 1993; Isenberg, 2002) and explored methodological issues concerning research about home educating families (Goymer, 2002). In research from the US, Lois (2005, 2006) looked at how the teaching role affects mothers and S. A. McDowell (1999, 2000a, 2000b) examined the perceived impact of home education on the family in general and mothers and the teaching relationship in particular.

The National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI), based in the US and founded in 1985, conducts its own research and chronicles other research about home education as well as publishing a research journal called *Home School Researcher*. NHERI also runs lectures and seminars and speaks with legislators on a state and national level and the media about home education issues. It has become allied to a home education



organisation, *Home Schooling Legal Defence Association* (HSLDA). HSLDA also does a lot of work at state and federal level representing the interests of home educators from a fundamentalist Christian perspective including Biblical interpretations of history and neo-conservative political positions.

### **Problems in Research on Home Educators**

Mayberry et al (1995) point to two problems specific to home education research: low response rate and assembling representative samples. This problem is compounded in the UK because it is not known how many home educators there are (Petrie, 1998; Petrie et al, 1999). Therefore, an adequate quantitative figure, that would represent a certain proportion of the home education community, is unknown and cannot be determined with the information to hand.

Low response rates may be due in part to some resistance toward researchers (Goymer, 2002). The home educating community is wary of research and therefore many families refuse in principle to take part in it (Kaseman and Kaseman, 1991). Many home educators do not see research as relevant to them because there is the perception that researchers have their own agenda or represent the educational establishment or that the information may be used to control home educators (Kaseman and Kaseman, 1997). These suspicions, coupled with parents' feelings of vulnerability to the education authorities and to criticism from the wider non-home educating community, may make the home educating community resistant to outsiders (Petrie et al, 1999).

Problems with finding participants are exemplified by Arora (2002) whose study, intended to find out why parents home educate, included twelve participants. While acknowledging sampling to be a problem, Arora (2002) felt that her method of obtaining participants was preferable to any other. She claimed that

...the characteristics of this group may be more typical of home educating parents than those reported in the literature, as the sampling was more comprehensive than is normally carried out. (p.22)

Arora criticised previous research for using a home education organization such as EO as the point of contact for participants. She states that the participants from EO are

... likely to be the more highly motivated and better educated of the entire group of home-educating parents, and their children are likely to benefit from such advantages (2002, p.8)

This claim cannot be upheld from research to date. In an area where there is little research and not much is known, it is all too easy to make unsubstantiated claims. The participants in Arora's (2002) study are all home educators known to the LA although there is no requirement for home educators to register with the LA. This method of selecting participants excludes any home educators not known to the LAs. The claim that members

of EO might be better educated and motivated is highly suspect. Even if this were true, excluding this group does not make for 'more comprehensive sampling' (Arora, 2002, p.22) but more selective sampling.

There has been some research using larger scale samples of home educators in the US (Rudner 1999; Cai, 2002; Ray 2004). However, as Welner and Welner (1999) have pointed out, even large samples are not necessarily representative. For example Rudner's (1999) research highlights the pitfalls of drawing conclusions about the home education community on the basis of a selective survey of "one section of the homeschooling population" (Welner and Welner, 1999). Failing to alert the reader adequately to the fact that the conclusions were drawn on the basis of information from a specific section of the home educating population is tantamount to making claims about the implications of the research that it, in fact, cannot uphold.

Mayberry et al's (1995) work also exemplifies the problem of finding participants that represent different types of home educators. Their study relied on a small number of participants who all live in specific geographical locations, namely Utah, Nevada and Washington, states that include a higher concentration of specific social groupings. This study falls into both traps of low response and non-representative participants, which was acknowledged by the researchers as a disadvantage of their study. Cai also cites as a limitation of his results that they "apply only to the religiously motivated home school teachers" (2002, p. 379) located in a small geographical area.



An additional problem of finding a representative population against which to measure your home education research is exemplified in McDowell, (1999, 2000). She accepted a definition of home educating families from Ray (1997). This definition includes: home educating parents as 98% married couples with mother as homemaker, relatively wealthy professionals, 90% Christians, with higher than average educational background themselves. It is difficult to accept this definition uncritically as the picture it paints of home educating families in the US as different from other home education sources such as national home education magazine *Life Learning Magazine* or *Home Education Magazine*. A reason for this could be because the thrust of home education research in the US is dominated by one sector of the home education population (Stevens, 2001). It seems that one group of home educators, spearheaded by NHERI, are more vocal and willing to participate in research than others. While NHERI has been an important focus for home education research, its dominance could mean that home education research may become stultified by relying on uncritical assumptions as a base line for home education research. The outcome of using NHERI's research, it is suggested, would be to present a biased vision of home education and generalisations made from their research are suspect. This makes the research itself of very limited use to other researchers.

Due to the home education population being so diverse in terms of background, social position, reasons for home educating and approaches to home education, it may be necessary to positing different home educating constituencies. For example, one constituency may be families taking their

children out of school to solve a short-term crisis. Another constituency may be families who chose to home educate their children from the start due to ideological convictions. There may also be families in multiple constituencies. For example, in the case of families withdrawing their children from school due to a crisis, continuing to home educate because of an ideological change thereby creating overlapping constituencies. The idea of constituencies may provide an analytical framework for understanding the home education population as a whole but this would need to be developed further.

### *Summary*

The definition of home education used in this study is the full time education of a child in and around the home where the parents or guardian are committed to their children's education. This definition stresses the parents' role, their commitment to the children's education and implies that they bear the entire responsibility for it.

Home education is legal in the UK. It is the duty of the Local Authorities (LA) to ensure that the law is complied with. In the US each state has its own laws about home education although it is possible in all states.

The number of home educators in the UK is difficult to determine. Estimates vary widely although the consensus is that the number is growing. This is also true in the US. At any rate, as home education becomes more

mainstream classification of who home educates and why they are home educating is becoming more difficult to accomplish. There are obvious pitfalls in trying to form conclusions about a 'home education community' from a particular sample. It is not just a question of the size of the sample but also a problem of selecting the participants in the study from all sections of the home education community.

The legal situation in the UK allows tremendous freedom, in terms of curriculum and educational approach, for parents who chose to home educate. Parents have very few requirements placed on them by the law. They do not have to answer to any educational authorities except in the broadest terms. However with this freedom can also come anxiety and insecurity. Not having an accepted framework in which to act can heighten parents' feelings of uncertainty. Parents have to live with the real and daily concern of having made a decision that will affect the children's future in an important way and being totally responsible for an important area in their children's development and education. Research into the effect on parents therefore would appear to be timely and hopefully raise issues relevant both to education and parenting.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### *General considerations*

The research paradigm used in this study is based in the life history and narrative approaches. Life history technique involves the use of self referential stories whose meaning is constructed by the author and which reflect on their identity at a particular time and place (Ayers and Chinn, cited in Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995). To a great extent life history relies on the “idiosyncratic personal dynamics” that is the defining characteristic of this approach (Goodson and Sikes, 2001, p. 19). In its favour, it leaves space for reflection and free association and is based on the understanding that humans make sense of their lives through stories (Hatch, 2002). In a complementary way, the narrative approach broadens and deepens the data from life history (Clough, 2002) by making connections between the autobiographical story and the wider social circumstances and conditions (Chinn, cited in Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995). This additional context allows the narrative approach to further interpret the life history material and to go beyond the personal (Cole, cited in Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995).

These approaches have been criticized for creating a ‘tyranny of the local’ (Harvey, 1989) and for not generating common truths, in being only concerned with individual experience. These approaches have also been criticised for moving away from cultural and political analysis, similarly to the way the media subjectivises news (Goodson, 1995). However, it could be

argued that is possible to learn about common social processes through concrete individuals' stories. In fact, it can be maintained, that it is only through looking at actual lives at an individual level that society as a whole can be understood (Chase, 2003). It could also be pointed out that the strengths of these approaches lie in enabling voices, previously silenced, not only to tell their personal stories and experiences (Goodson, 1995) but for this to count as legitimate data from those who could not find a place in previous methodological paradigms (Goodson, 1995). Conversely, these methods allow truths to be uncovered through researchers listening carefully to the stories and counting them as central and pertinent information. The life history and narrative approaches provide a voice for life stories, cultures and situations that are not ordinarily known to nor valued by the academic world (Becker, 1970, quoted in Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Miller and Glasser, 1997). Through stories it can be seen how people develop meaning from their own lived experience (Casey, 1990), use stories "to make sense and impose meaning on their lives and construct a sense of self" (Britton and Baxter, 1999, p.89). This is particularly relevant when looking at marginal activities, activities in which the population is small and any group about which there is little research data available, all of which are true of home education.

These methods are particularly important to this study which is trying to determine whether parents construct meanings differently because they are home educating. Further, these approaches see adult development as situated in lived lives (Rossiter, 1999) reflecting the eventual central theoretical

framework used in this study, the Community of Practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998).

### *Fieldwork Considerations*

In-depth interviews were chosen as the best technique to complement life history and narrative technique (Goodson and Sikes, 2001), to elicit information from home educating parents about how they thought home education affected them and their lives and to gain insight into their world (Miller and Glassner, 1997). Before the interviews could take place preliminary questionnaires were undertaken to establish the relevance of questions to be asked.

The role of the researcher through in-depth interviews is far from easy and requires the "engagement in the world under study; it also implies a commitment to a search for meaning, a suspension of preconceptions and an orientation to discovery"(Ball, 1990, p.3). This stance is quite different from any other social interaction. The researcher must be genuinely interested, respond appropriately and remain relatively uninvolved in the setting. These requirements involve some compromise between objectively obtaining knowledge and simultaneously being friendly in order to make the interviewee feel at ease. They require the researcher to remain aloof yet open. The researcher must present as 'objective' a persona as possible while at the same time achieving friendly interested interaction with the interviewee. The researcher must try to monitor and constantly interpret their own behaviour



and determine how their behaviour may be influencing the course of the interview. Only by being aware of their own 'mind-set' and by 'bracketing' their values can the researcher begin to search out and understand the world of others (Hutchinson, 1988). However, this is not to say that external issues such as having children present can be ignored. Part of the researcher's skill will be revealed through how they attend to problems or navigate through distractions enabling the interviewee to feel at ease but still remain focused on the interview questions.

This 'Reflexivity' involves a self conscious stance toward research (Rose, 2002; R. Edwards, 2002) where the qualitative researcher tries to address the pitfalls of losing objectivity (Lather 1986) and to also relate to the questions, the data, the interviewees and their life history narrative. The interviewee's narrative is included as part of the reflexive process (Britton and Baxter, 1999) insofar as the researcher must sensitively interpret the 'stories' to be accurate to the meaning of the interviewees give to their world experience. While acknowledging the important role of reflexivity for the qualitative researcher using the life history and narrative approaches as a method of data collection, it must also be remembered that many aspects of the researcher are not in the researcher's control and have to be accepted as part of the given situation. Gender, physique, social position and the objective structure of the social world are some examples of parts of the researcher's self that cannot be substantially changed through reflexive thought alone. An overemphasis on a reflexive biography can lead to the idea that anything in

modern society can be changed which expresses itself as the “overemphasis on the emancipatory expressive possibilities” (McNay, 1999, p. 98).

### **Personal Involvement and Objectivity**

While most researchers begin a project solely because of their intellectual interest in the topic, in my case I came to this research both through intellectual interest and through my own experience of home education.

There is acknowledged precedent for ‘insider research’ (van Heugten, 2004; Coghlan and Hollian, 2007). Sikes (1997) explains that her reason for undertaking her research was motivated by marking the changes in her own life on becoming a parent. She wondered whether other teachers who became parents had a similar experience. In a comparable way, I underwent a significant change during my home educating experience and wanted to discover whether this was true for other parents. In fact there is a body of methodological thought developed from feminist epistemologies which argues that auto/biography is the best way to understand a group being researched (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001; Perselli, 2004). More radically, Miller (2004) argues for the legitimate use of reflexive auto/biographies as evidence for adult learning. He uses his own history as data for his research, including his activities, emotional reactions and the minutiae of his life. While I am not using this autobiographical method, it must be acknowledged that my experience as a home educator will affect every aspect of this project. However, I have been aware of constantly having to be reflectively self-critical in order to promote as much objectivity as possible.



While personal interest is acknowledged as a perfectly good reason for research (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007) there is still some feeling that the neutrality and objectivity of the researcher will be compromised if they are emotionally involved in the research area. In the traditional research model, the 'objective' researcher is ideally to be as emotionless as possible and it has been assumed that this is not possible if the researcher is involved in the subject area. However, with the rise of life history and narrative approaches to research, these assumptions have been challenged. Emihovich (1995) argues that emotions can be linked to reason and that distancing ourselves from the emotions and passions that are raised by our research can lessen the power and relevance of that research. Given that it is almost impossible to avoid some emotions in an interview it seems a more coherent methodology to try to understand, acknowledge and attempt to deal with emotions rather than ignore them. This could lead to more open, productive and accurate research results.

Further, 'objective' research has been criticised because there is a possibility that trying to be 'objective' can negatively distort the researcher/interviewee relationship. Goodson and Walker (1995) note that at times the needs of the researcher to ensure 'objectivity' means the researcher maintains an impersonal relationship with the research subject. Researchers do this to reduce their influence on the research but in fact, in practice, this often means the "alienation of the 'subject' from the process of the study" (Goodson and Walker, 1995, p.112). Goodson and Walker (1995) suggest that the traditional 'objective' role of the researcher actually gets in the way of



research and that a relaxed interviewee is more important than detached analysis. It is possible therefore that being personally involved in the research can lead to a more collaborative, personalised and engaged relationship with the interviewees and this can, in turn, lead to richer and more interesting research data.

Having a personal stake, bringing emotional investment and in addition, making insider assumptions about a topic have been considered reasons for avoiding insider research (Anderson and Herr, 1999). However, Brannick and Coghlan (2007) have challenged this attitude. They contend that insider research can be as valid, useful and theoretically enriching as traditional research methods so long as the researcher is “aware of the strengths and limits of their pre-understanding so that they can use their experiential and theoretical knowledge to reframe their understanding of situations to which they are close.” (2007, p.72).

Further, insider researchers may have a deeper knowledge and understanding of aspects of the subject as a result of having a pre-understanding of the topic. These aspects may be important and may be missed by those outside the subject. For example, teachers who leave the teaching profession to do research may bring knowledge of the bureaucratic organisation of schools and the nature of front of class teaching to the research which outsiders do not have. In this same way, research into home education by a long term home educator could mean having a deeper

understanding and knowledge of, for example, being with your children twenty four hours a day.

### **Power Relations in interviews**

Ball (1990) points out that the position of the researcher in the community will influence the power relations in the interview. As I am well known in the wider home education community and this could have some influence on power relations in the interviews. The interviewees may have read something I have written in the home education press and attribute greater abilities, more expertise or a higher position in the community to me than I actually have. Further, knowing that I have educated my children throughout their 'school years' at the same time as pursuing a degree course may raise feelings of inadequacy in them. While such perceptions are unwarranted, it must be borne in mind that the interviewee may feel less powerful than the researcher as a result. This may then lead to a particular attitude towards me, involving reluctance to tell me about their weaknesses, a propensity to attempt to impress me or even show hostility towards me.

On the other hand, in other respects, the researcher will be less powerful than the interviewee. For example, in my case, I was in their home and was after something they had, information about their lives. The interviewee, while often feeling pleased that someone was interested in their story, might also realise that they held something of value to the researcher.



Peshkin (1984) articulates a need for the researcher to 'keep in' with the interviewee in order to obtain data. The interviewee holds the power to divulge information or not and how much to tell. They are able to control the place, the time and the length of the interview as well as the level of intimacy at which they are willing to speak (Kehly, 1995). They can decide who else is present, for example their children, and what other activities are taking place. Any of these factors may result in interviewees slanting their answers either to make themselves feel better about their own experience or to give the answers they think the researcher would like to hear.

In the case of home education, there may be an added pressure on interviewees that is external to the researcher/interviewee relationship. Parents may feel a pressure to present themselves and home education in what they think is a 'good light' both to uphold home education as a good thing but also to validate their choice and continuance of it.

There is another area where the interviewee can gain power in the relationship which is that every story told is on a continuum of truth insofar as the story changes with the telling and to whom it is being told. Our memories are very selective and our recall often doubtful. Further, a 'lie', a deliberate attempt by the interviewee to obscure or mislead is always possible. Sikes (2000) feels that qualitative researchers are less likely to be lied to because of their relationship to interviewees, which tends to be "more intimate and more enduring, both due to the nature of the methods of data collection that are used and to the relatively small numbers of people likely to



be involved" (p.258). But despite this, memories are fickle and time changes stories to subtly reflect new positions.

Hodges (1998) points out that power shapes not only memory but also identity, which is not stable and is constantly reacting to the power relations facing a person. To complicate matters, a person's identity also involves a historical self which has been constructed in line with previous power relations which also has a bearing on present identity.

However, the interviewee's stories themselves, despite perhaps being inaccurate to the facts, still teach us something. In this project, the 'truth' of the interviewee's stories must be accepted as there is no way to verify or refute them. Most importantly, the point of this study is to ascertain the subjective feeling of the parents about home education and how it has affected them. So to some extent, it is not the literal accuracy of parents' stories that is important. It is the parents' interpretation and view of their lives as they see it that is fundamental to this research. Note that the guide/narrator/researcher who takes responsibility for making the relevance of the story clear also has an input to the meaning and veracity of the story. This highlights the fact that stories which are subjectively constructed by both participants of the interview may not be strictly true (Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995).

All these concerns about the researcher/interviewee relationship in the fieldwork, as Ball (1990) points out, show that no information is neutral. The

'results' collected through this research have to be seen as the result of the interactions between a particular researcher and the particular interviewee in a particular time and space. In the end, perhaps the best that can be achieved is for the researcher to be aware of all the pitfalls associated with interviewing, make them as explicit as possible and combine this with an honest endeavour to be as objective as possible (Lather, 1986).

### *Gathering the Data: Questionnaires*

Two groups participated in this study, those who completed an initial preliminary questionnaire and a separate group who were interviewed in-depth and provided the data upon which the results were based. Questions were formulated for the questionnaires with the research issues outlined in Chapter One in mind: does the experience of long term home significantly educating affect parents, and if so, how? These answers were then collated with a view to the in-depth interview questions. First nineteen parents from the UK and US were interviewed. These interviews were collated and a second set of fourteen parents were interviewed in the UK. A few additional questions were added to this second set of interviews.

This study only includes parents who have been home educating for more than three years because these families will presumably be settled in the decision to home educate, have a reasonably clear idea of what it entails and be able to articulate its strengths and weakness as they see it. Although it



might be true that this stipulation creates a bias toward 'successful' home educators (Mayberry et al, 1995) in the sense that parents have not given up, this is not a problem for this study because it is the intention of this research to study the effects of home education after long experience of it.

Since the central thrust of this study is to examine how the home educating experience affects parents, both mothers' and fathers' experiences were sought. In fact, of the fifty questionnaires, seven were completed by fathers (14%) and of the thirty-four parents who were interviewed thirty-one were mothers and three were fathers (9%). Why this may be the case will be discussed later. Despite the low numbers of fathers involved in the study, the term 'parents' has continued to be used when talking about contributors to this study to remind the reader of the initial intention of gathering both parents' views. However, it must be remembered that most of the opinions given are those of the mothers.

Participants in the US were sought for comparative purposes. If all the interviews took place in the UK then the results of this study could be due to national or cultural factors rather than to factors specific to home education. There was no reason to expect major differences. This had been suggested previously by Thomas (1998) who studied home educators in the UK and Australia and found nothing significantly different, but it is useful to confirm this for the UK and the US.



The decision to include some families from the US was made during the interview stage. Prospective parents were contacted through the home education press and local contacts as in the UK (for a more detailed account of how the prospective parents were contacted see below). Word of mouth and recommendation also played a large part in obtaining volunteers for the interviews in both countries.

The US was chosen as the control because the US and the UK are different in many ways; for example, the legal position with regard to home education is different (see Chapter 2), the US has, on balance, a higher standard of living and those living in the US usually have less class consciousness. However, in recent times, the two countries have become more interconnected in their political and economic policies (Hitchens, 2007) and have moved toward similar economic status and life expectations (Porter, 2007). Importantly, the US and the UK also have a similar history with regard to home education; EO and GWS were formed around the same period based on similar ideals and relying on the work of John Holt. Further, the experience of individuals who are home educating in these two countries have important similarities of being outside the mainstream, dealing with the establishment, taking on the enormous responsibility of one's children's education, having to develop some theory of education and needing to defend the choice to home educate to others.

The home educating community was approached to answer the questionnaire using all the available sources of advertising including the home educating

newsletters such as *Education Otherwise*, *Home Education Advisory Service* and *Choice in Education*. The result was disappointing as only three parents requested a copy of the questionnaire which they all completed and returned. I also placed adverts on two home education internet lists, UK Home Ed List and EO List, asking for those willing to answer questionnaires. This elicited fourteen parents who all sent the questionnaires back answered. I attribute this success rate to the ease of receiving, filling in and returning the questionnaires on the internet, added to which it is likely that people on the lists are more used to contributing.

Additional participants were sought at an annual home education conference which includes guest speakers, discussions, book launches, films and so on. This conference is part of a week long festival where the average attendance for the years 1999 and 2000 was two hundred and fifty home educating families. I organise and run the conference within the festival and was able to explain my research and ask participants to take away and fill in a questionnaire. Of the approximately fifty questionnaires taken at the conference over two years, thirty-one were returned answered. The more personal approach, it seems, may have produced a better response (62%).

I also asked families at home education meetings in London to participate. Of the approximately twenty questionnaires given out at the meeting seven were returned (35%). The questionnaires were all filled in by parents from Britain except for one parent who wrote to me from Jersey asking for a questionnaire



after she had read an article about the research in the Open University Newsletter.

The conference and London meetings returned thirty-eight of the approximately seventy forms handed out which amounts to over half the questionnaires completed and returned (54%). This good rate of return of answered questionnaires could show that parents had an interest in the project, or my position in the home education community made some difference or that the home education community is more open to research than previously thought (Kaseman and Kaseman, 1991, 1997).

Of the fifty-five returned questionnaires, fifty were used. The five not used each represented one partner in a family where the other partner had also filled in the questionnaire meaning some of the data was duplicated. It was decided to use only one filled in questionnaire from each family so that the fifty questionnaires would represent fifty families.

The questionnaire went through revisions following piloting (see Appendix 2a and 2b for the questions and Appendix 3 for an example of an answered questionnaire from each version.) Following Ball (1991), after emersion in the answered questionnaires different threads were put into nineteen different matrices, a matrix for each question. In these matrices threads were on the perpendicular axis and numbers corresponding to each parent was placed on the horizontal axis. Each new thread was given a heading and if any parent made the same or a similar point a tick was place in the corresponding box. After all the answers were tabled in this way the number of parents who had



commented on any particular issue could be easily identified. Threads and stories were grouped into general areas of agreement between interviewees to see if common significant themes arose (Ely, 1991). The results are summarised in Appendix 4. The intention of this preliminary research had been to assist in establishing a focus for a more in-depth study and to help form the questions for the in-depth interviews. In light of the results of the questionnaire stage, similar questions were asked in the interviews, and these responses were explored in greater depth.

## *The Interviews*

### **Contacting Prospective Participants**

Home educators may be contacted through the LAs or through home educating networks such as home education national organisations or the home education internet lists. It was decided not to approach parents through LAs. As Petrie et al (1999) found, writing to prospective participants through the LA might lead to the perception that a request for information or contact was somehow an official request. Further, contacting parents through the traditional educational establishment, like the LAs, might have meant parents felt compromised about the confidentiality of their interviews, perhaps leading to a low response rate. In any case, home educators known to the LA would also be likely to be affiliated to home education networks so that I would be able to contact both those known to the LAs and those unknown by going through the home education networks.

In order to avoid families that I knew in the UK, I initially approached the coordinators for EO outside of the city where I live. The coordinator might both know families who were willing to be interviewed and be able to approach them in a familiar way. This method also saved me from approaching families unwilling to take part in the research. In the small home education community, this type of insensitivity might have led to bad feeling toward me, preventing other families agreeing to be part of the project.

The participants in the US were contacted through two different methods. The first method was again to contact a coordinator of home education in one area and this resulted in contact with six parents in that area. The second method of contact was to ring up those listed on the national home education list in *GWS*, an American home education support magazine. Three families, one from the Boston area and two from the Palm Beach area, agreed to participate in the study. (For tables outlining background details about the parents, how they were contacted and how the interview was conducted see Appendix 5).

Given some of the difficulties that have to be overcome when researching home education such as distance between families and aversion to being involved in a study, the method of obtaining interviewees in this study was reasonably ad hoc and opportunistic in nature. For example, some parents only put themselves forward for interview because a friend suggested they should (Dunne, 1997; Hatch, 2002).

## **Interview Questions**

The interviews were conducted through a series of open-ended questions which began with 'can you tell me about your background?' (see Appendix 6a for the first set of interview questions). Such a request leaves it up to the interviewee to decide what is relevant and what can be revealed. This may tell us more about the parent than if the researcher were very specific. It was also thought to be easier for the interviewee to answer questions about the past (Patton, 2002) and it was hoped that asking for information about background could ease any tension in the interview situation.

Use of open ended interviews enabled me, as I had intended, to play as minimal a role as possible. By allowing the interviewee to talk for as long as they wanted about whatever issues they associated with the issue raised without interruption, it was hoped to encourage them to tell their life stories in a way that might not have been elicited through precise questions and constant interchange which might have steered the responses in some particular way. Because most parents had not thought about some of the topics before, there were some gaps and silences in their answers.

As well as being asked about their backgrounds, parents were asked to describe how they heard about home education and why they had begun home educating. They were also asked to think back to when they first began home educating and to reflect on their thoughts about how they would approach it and what it would mean for their lives. Parents were then asked about their financial situation (for example, their budget), career issues (for



example, how they structure their work if they were working), how they divide their time and whether there were any changes to relationships in the family. Self-perceptions were addressed in questions about how they saw themselves before home educating, how they see themselves now, and how they see their future selves. Questions were also asked about how parents think children and adults learn in the home educating setting and about the effects of home education on parents' views on education. The interviews ended with a request to be able to return to them if needed.

### **Number of Interviewees**

After the initial nineteen interviews were transcribed and partially analysed it emerged that further data was needed. As with the questionnaires, it became apparent that this project was primarily addressing parents at the level of their sense of self and their identification as home educators. This led to a search for a theoretical framework that could encompass these aspects of the data. A further set of questions was added in the second set of interviews with the Community of Practice framework in mind. These focused on issues of identity developing from membership of communities of practice (see Appendix 6b for the added interview questions). Using the same methods as before, I contacted fifteen more parents in the UK.

### **Brief Outline of Interviewees**

A brief outline of the background characteristics of the parents will give some idea of the diversity and similarities in the interview groups (see Appendix 6). Appendix 7 gives more detailed features of the background situations of the

parents interviewed. Further analysis reveals that of the thirty-four parents interviewed, four were interviewed as couples (three were heterosexual and one lesbian) and seven as single parents. Thirty-one were women and three were men. Thirteen of the thirty-four parents were from the US. The number of children in each family ranged from one to seven. There were eighty-seven children from the thirty families. Of the thirty families, eight families (thirty-three children) began home education without sending their children to school. Twenty-two families began to home educate after they found a problem with their eldest at school. Fewer than half the parents have a first degree at university. Three have a further degree. Four are qualified teachers. Eight parents were educated to secondary school level.

The three fathers interviewed work full time in paid employment. Their wives are the main home educators. One parent in the lesbian couple also works full time. Of the thirty-one mothers interviewed, eleven work part time in paid employment. Twenty mothers did not work in any paid employment.

The main reason for home educating mentioned was that their children were unhappy at school or that home education was a natural extension of their parenting beliefs. Religion did not play a significant part in the decision to home educate.

This shows a high variety of situations but it also indicates a large proportion of families having an above average number of children. This has been confirmed by other recent studies (Rothermel, 2003; Fortune-Wood, 2005)



and may support the supposition that families who choose to home educate see children and family life as an important part of their lives even before they begin home educating.

### **Interviewing procedure**

After the initial contact, I explained who I was and what the research was about. I explained that the interview would be conducted by my asking a series of questions and that their answers would be tape-recorded. I assured the participants that the interviews would be confidential and seen in full only by my supervisors if they asked to read them. After the interview had been transcribed, I would give them a complete transcript of the interview to look over and revise if necessary. Once satisfied they would sign a form allowing me to use their transcript for the thesis, keeping a copy of the transcribed interview for themselves.

The issue of where the interviews took place was more problematic than I had anticipated. I felt unable to impose too many requirements on parents and therefore made 'the best' of any settings. Nineteen of the interviews were conducted in the homes of the interviewee or a friend's home. Of the other fifteen interviews, eleven were conducted over the phone, three at a swimming baths and one at a restaurant.

The latter two locations presented some difficulty. The interview conducted at a restaurant involved interruptions when we ordered and received our food, noise from other patrons and confusion from the normal activities associated



with a restaurant. The interview conducted at a swimming bath encountered noise levels which were very high due to the poor acoustics of the tiled surroundings and confusion associated with the activities of a swimming bath. Despite these distractions, all four parents interviewed under these conditions seemed open, approachable and receptive to my questions. Nor did the interviews feel constrained or abbreviated. Moreover, on transcription, I do not think the interviews conducted in public were any less revealing than any of the other interviews.

By leaving the decision to the interviewee about the length of time, place and who would attend the interview, it was hoped some rapport would be established and that they would feel the researcher was there to listen to them, that they could take as long as they wanted and that they had some real control over the interview. It also encouraged them to engage in a conversational style of answer.

The issue of whether or not children should be present at the interview was a sensitive matter that I felt I should leave to the parent to decide. The nature of home education is that the children are at home and are familiar with being present during their parents' activities but they may still need care and attention. I wanted to intrude as little as possible. In any case, asking parents to have the children looked after elsewhere might have presented them with difficulties and would almost certainly have adversely affected the interview. Therefore I left the decision of whether the children were present up to the parent after having explained what the interview would entail.

Of the first nineteen people interviewed, children were present in ten cases. However, this bare figure does not give an accurate picture of the complexity of the situation. These ranged from noisy children in a swimming baths, constantly interrupting, to an older teenager who was working in a room nearby. My strategy was to allow interruptions as in a normal conversation with parents who have children close by, accepting that the children's needs came first. Surprisingly this made the interruptions less intrusive as once the children's needs were met they went back to playing together. None of the parents seemed to find it a problem but dealt with the children's needs and then brought their attention back to me. They did sometimes lose the thread of what they had been saying but asked me to remind them and then quickly took up the conversation where they left off. It seemed to me that they were practised at this, as are many parents with children. The fact that I was accepting of their children's needs and the parents' need to fulfil them, may have helped parents feel at ease with me. In the most extreme case at the swimming baths, the children played quite happily, although noisily, near by. One parent also fed a child she was child minding while we talked. Occasionally parents themselves sometimes found the disruptions annoying and delayed addressing their children's needs on those occasions.

A further unexpected problem in three interviews was my expecting to meet one parent and on arrival finding several parents together. In these cases it led to a group discussion of some issues which were very interesting and may have yielded more data than would otherwise have been forthcoming. But



there were also problems of parents interrupting each other, arguing and using short-hand expressions to each other that sometimes made it difficult for me to follow the line of the discussion. I further found I often had to let go of my interview questions and was less in control of the flow of the discussion. It would have been pedantic and rude for me to draw the discussion back to where I wanted it to go and so I would leave that topic.

In one 'group' when I arrived at the house there were two parents present. The parent whose house I had come to left the room while I interviewed the visiting parent although I think this was not for reasons of confidentiality but for practical reasons. When she returned the first parent remained in the room for the second parent's interview. Although none of the data from the interviews was obviously confidential or disturbing, having someone else present may have affected what was said. Nevertheless, it is possible that having someone else present would make the interviewee more secure and therefore likely to relax and reveal more about themselves. It was the participating parent's choice to have another parent present. The fact that another parent was present could be seen as an innocent thoughtless choice, an attempt to help me (knowing that I was interviewing many parents), a way for the parent to feel more secure or a combination of these factors. It did not seem to be done to intentionally disrupt confidentiality or make another parent feel nervous but I cannot be sure of their motives.

Another unintentional group interview was of a husband and wife and was conducted on the telephone. In this case, one parent often answered the



questions for both of them. They would 'give' each other the question by saying 'why don't you take that one?' to the other. It was not possible for me to ask them both the same questions without seeming somewhat rude. When I attempted to do this by asking 'what do you think?', the parent would usually refer to their spouse's previous answer. Occasionally they added something to each other's statements and in one case showed concern and admiration for the other's home education role. Again, it is impossible to say whether the interview would have been more revealing if I had interviewed them separately. If they have habitual stories that they both tell I might have received much the same information twice. It could also be the case that they felt more secure and happy to be interviewed together and were therefore more revealing.

It became clear early on in the course of the research that some parents had not thought about their relationship to home education, for example some parents gave several answers to questions as if they were trying out different possible answers. Due to this fact, the interview itself may cause some alteration in the interviewees, especially if they are thinking about the effects of home education on their own lives for the first time.

### **Collating the Data from Interviews for Analysis**

After transcribing the interviews in full it became apparent that analysing the interviews would be complicated (Perryman, 2007). Each interview consisted of about 5000 words leading eventually to nearly 170,000 words of interview material. The amount of data collected from the first nineteen interviews

therefore required some difficult decisions to firstly collate and then analyse and it had to be taken into consideration that there is a subjective element to this sifting. As Stake (2000) observes

However moved to share ideas, however clever and elaborate their findings, case researchers, like others, pass along to readers some of their personal meanings of events and relationships – and fail to pass along others. They know that the reader, too, will add and subtract, invent and shape – reconstructing the knowledge in ways that leave it differently connected and more likely to be personally useful.

As with the questionnaires, following Ball (1991), after emersion in the data, threads of issues raised in the replies were extrapolated from the interviews and were put into matrices, one for each interview question. A matrix was created for each interview question. In these matrices shorthand indications of the threads were on the perpendicular axis and numbers corresponding to each parent was placed on the horizontal axis. Each new thread was given a heading and if another parent made the same or similar point a tick was place in the corresponding box. A distillation and collation of the data from the matrices was then compiled with answers grouped into themes. (For an example of one of the interview collation matrices on the theme of careers see Appendix 8a and b).

After all the interviews were collated in this way, analysis of the issues mentioned and who indicted what issue to be relevant could be read off the

matrix. The number of parents who had commented on any particular issues could be easily identified. Threads and stories were then grouped into general areas of agreement between interviewees to see if any common significant themes arose (Ely, 1991). For an overview, a tabled analysis of the interview data was drawn up (see Appendix 9). The aim of this analysis was not to test theory but to gain insight into and deeper comprehension of the data.

This analysis led, after discussion, to the addition of questions to the original questions. The last fifteen interviews were conducted and were then collated and analysed using the same method to see if these later interviews confirmed, contradicted or raised new topics from the first interviews. (See Appendix 8b for an example of part of one of the interview collation matrices from the second set of interviews).

## *Summary*

This study is an exploratory investigation focusing on the question of how long term home educating parents think the experience has affected them and their lives. Qualitative research methods, with their emphasis on uncovering parents' perspectives and allowing researchers to immerse themselves in the topic, were seen as vital to understanding parents' experiences (Patton, 2002). Life histories and narrative research techniques were used in order to allow analysis of previously unheard voices to be



recorded and can uncover a wider and more profound view of the self-perceptions of the interviewees to be uncovered.

In this study, there were many fieldwork considerations for the researcher to consider and cope with such as remaining uninvolved during the interview, being open to all views and monitoring one's own behaviour. This study originated out of my own experience and since I am a member of the research group, issues of objectivity arising from being a participant researcher have to be addressed (Sikes, 1997). The life history and narrative approaches have challenged the previously accepted view of the 'objective' researcher's detached and distant persona. Being emotionless toward research is not necessarily the only nor the best approach. Rather, while it is the responsibility of the insider researcher to acknowledge, try to understand and put aside any feelings involved in their research, being emotionally open can bring advantages such as putting the interviewees at ease and encouraging the interviewee to reveal themselves.

There are also power relations between the researcher and the interviewee that need addressing. For example, the interviewee may either feel intimidated by the researcher or realise they have information the researcher needs and have the option to withhold it. It is the responsibility of the researcher to be aware of these tensions in the interview situation.

Because home education, particularly as it related to parents, is not a previously well researched topic, the research began with fifty preliminary

questionnaires to try to determine a set of questions for in-depth interviews. For the interviews, parents were contacted from the UK and the US (to control for national bias), through the home education national organisations and word of mouth. The practical details of the interviews, such as the time and place of the interview and whether children were present, were left up to the interviewee to decide. This meant the researcher faced a wide variety of interview situations which made some of the interviews difficult.

After analysis of the questionnaires, the first nineteen interviews were conducted and analysed. Then a further fifteen interviews were undertaken with added questions about parents' identities. Finally the complete set of thirty-four interviews were conducted, transcribed in full, collated and analysed for common themes in the hope of finding and supporting potential claims.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Communities of Practice**

A reciprocal dynamic exists between the individual and society. It is the concern of this thesis to try to understand this process with regard to parents who home educate. The conceptual framework of 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) provides a promising theoretical framework for this task. It posits a model of dynamic transmission through participation in a community of practice and generally theorises that learning and identity arise from change in individuals caused by participation in social processes.

Wenger's (1998) later community of practice model conceptualises a specific social situation where people organise for a common purpose. This model attempts to explain learning and identity as a result of participating in such a community. Learning is seen as carrying out the work of the community in a way that the community regards as successful and as such changes the community as much as the individual, involving the whole person, not just their intellectual prowess (Hammersley, 2004). In this way, who a person is becomes intimately bound up with the communities of practice they belong to, not just as an individual identifying with a community of practice, but through their interactions with the wider world.



## *What are Communities of Practice?*

### **Joint Enterprise, Mutual Engagement and Shared Repertoire**

Wenger (1998) outlines three main elements of a community of practice.

First, it requires a 'joint enterprise', a common purpose. The joint enterprise is the reason the community of practice exists. The joint enterprise is defined by the participants and it creates ways in which the participants come together. For example, a choir's joint enterprise could be for members to sing and perform together. Negotiating the meaning of the joint enterprise is vital for maintaining and defining it and the meaning is continually being renegotiated and rewritten by the members. In the choir example this may mean the choir having a more specific joint enterprise such as singing in a certain church or singing a certain type of music. What this joint enterprise means and how it translates into activity is then negotiated by the members and the members' relationship to the joint enterprise is reflected in their commitment to it.

The second element of a community of practice is 'mutual engagement' which refers to the nature of the membership of the community. People work together within the community of practice creating differences as well as similarities. Each person's involvement in the community of practice further integrates and refines the community. Benefits of the constantly changing practice are the deepening of the community of practice making it better able to reflect the enterprise. This also involves participants exerting much time

and effort. Active membership takes a lot of commitment and work. If a person does not feel able to make this commitment they may fall away from the membership at the centre of the community of practice and sometimes from membership entirely. In this way, membership is self-selecting and the continued life of the community of practice is ensured as long as some members are interested in maintaining it.

The third element of a community of practice is 'shared repertoire' which refers to the common culture of the community. This is made manifest through its stories and history, slang, 'in' jokes, jargon, routines, artefacts and modes of operating. "To be competent [in the shared repertoire] is to have access to this repertoire and be able to use it appropriately" (Wenger, 2000, p.229). To continue the choir example, an example of shared repertoire in the choir community of practice might be nicknames given to the choir leader or abbreviated versions of titles in their musical repertoire.

Communities of practice are all around us in life. Each of us belongs to a number although we may not realise this. Communities of practice are diverse and can be made up of any number of people, from a small office to a large institution such as a school or prison. They are collectively constructed and maintained. Communities of practice support communal memories that allow individuals to perform an activity without needing to know everything about the area of concern of that community. Staying with the choir example, that community could contain knowledge of past music, concerts and members, without any specific individual member knowing all of this. This



accumulated knowledge can generate specific perspectives which enable the members to accomplish what needs to be done in the community.

### **Practice/Participation**

*Practice* is at the core of communities of practice. Practice involves actions that are intended to achieve something, such as a goal or a project. This intention gives meaning and helps make sense of our actions in the world. Practice is imbued with and reflects a history of the individual and the culture and history of the society in which the individual lives. However, there can be an ever-changing subtle shift in the meaning of practice and this requires a member of the community of practice to be constantly re-negotiating the meaning of any activity vis a vis their own lives and in relation to the outside world.

Participation in a community of practice refers to the process of practising in a community. "It suggests both action and connection" (Wenger, 1998, p.55). It involves the social experience of membership and involvement in a community. It is both personal and social, actively involving the whole person. Through participation the individual comes to feel part of the community. Crucially participation is both "an action and an act of belonging" (Wenger, 1999, p. 56), such that the community of practice becomes part of a participant's life. Likewise the community is transformed by an individual's participation in it and the nature of the community is also changed somewhat. Therefore participation is the nexus at which social continuity and change are both experienced and developed.



## **Learning**

Learning within a community of practice is not external to the joint enterprise or set apart from it. It is the project. The learning happens through participation in a community which involves meeting together with a goal in mind, understanding and tuning the enterprise and developing repertoire, that is, styles and discourse around the joint enterprise.

Significant learning “is what changes our ability to engage in practice, the understanding of why we engage in it, and the resources we have at our disposal to do so ... Our experience and our membership inform each other, pull each other, and transform each other” (Wenger, 1998, p.96). The participant creates what is to be learned while they are learning it. In this way, learning cannot be said to be outside the practice or prior to it but is embedded in it.

## **Reification**

For Wenger (1998) reification is a process central to the idea of practice. Wenger uses ‘reification’ to mean “the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into ‘thingness’” (p1998, p.58). Wenger is not just talking about making concrete, aspects of a community that are in subjective or abstract form, such as the unwritten rules of the community, but is contending that concrete objects are imbued with the history, meaning and life of the community. So for example, the choir might have a membership form. This is a reified object in itself as a form and representation of the choir but it also implicitly contains some history of the choir, who drew it up, how it was decided what would go on it,

why it was decided that a form was needed and so forth. Further, through creating reified objects a common understanding is negotiated. An understanding is given objective form and is then available to others. For example the processes that Wenger includes in reifying an object are 'making, designing, representing, naming, encoding and describing as well as perceiving, interpreting, using, reusing, decoding and recasting.' (1998, p.59).

Among the reified objects of a community of practice could be a constitution, for example. It contains the thoughts and purposes of a group of individuals at a particular time. It continues to contain individual thoughts and purposes even after the individuals involved in writing it have moved away from the community of practice. Other resources such as routines and tools embody the nature of the community of practice. These also embody the history of the community of practice and the ways that have been worked out in the past for negotiating meaning and practice within the community.

The meaning of objects of reification can be re-negotiated, that is, their meaning can subtly shift through the practice of the community of practice. These reified objects and ways of working can also become symbols of the community of practice around which the community can cohere, such as badges or flags. These objects also serve to shape the experience of the members of the community and are reified aspects of the community's identity.

This history of energy and commitment held in the reified object, coupled with the energy and commitment of the participants, helps drive the community of practice forward and ensure its survival in times of conflict, stress and change.

### **Joining a Community of Practice**

Lave and Wenger (1991) describe in some depth how a newcomer joins a community of practice, concentrating on an apprenticeship model of learning. When someone becomes interested in a community they join on the periphery and move to the centre through participation in the community. New members must be integrated into the community through participating in it and thereby at the same time, learning and affecting the joint enterprise and the shared repertoire of the community of practice. Lave and Wenger coined the term 'legitimate peripheral participation' to describe the role of newcomers to the group and their journey to becoming full participants. "Legitimate peripheral participation is intended as a conceptual bridge – as a claim about the common processes inherent in the production of changing persons and changing communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.55).

For the newcomer to become a full member in the community of practice two things must happen. First, the peripheral member needs to have legitimacy as a newcomer even though they are not yet a full-fledged member (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This is the only way the old-timers are likely to see them as acceptable and help them through the learning process and all that this



involves. Legitimacy can take many forms, from birthright, getting a job or as in this study, taking your children out of or never sending them to school (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Second, the newcomer must have some affinity, although not necessarily explicit affinity, with the three main areas of practice: the joint enterprise of the group, mutual engagement with other members, and the shared repertoire in use. If these two criteria are met then the newcomer is exposed to full participation in the form of stories, explanations, answers to questions, peripheral activities and observations.

In the early stages of joining a community of practice newcomers can develop an idea of what the whole is about. There is no one place from which knowledge comes. This 'decentering' of learning "leads to an understanding that mastery resides not in the master but in the organisation of the community of practice of which the master is a part" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.94). This moves the focus of learning away from teaching and towards learning and the relationship of the learner to the practice.

The participation of newcomers in the community is as much a part of the process and growth of the community of practice as the continual re-evaluation of the community by the old timers. Members, new and old, continually interact, discuss, re-evaluate, negotiate new meaning and learn from each other. In other words, the membership continually produces the community of practice in the same way that it comes about in the first place.

Guile and Young (2001) point out that the apprenticeship model of learning involves people developing ways of thinking outside the immediate joint enterprise, giving them insight into why and how it is possible to generate new knowledge by the 'master' encouraging the 'apprentice' to extend beyond their current ability. In communities of practice, old timers (the masters), who have developed their competence in this same way, now develop and share that competence with new members (the apprentices) of the community of practice.

Billet (1994) sees the role of the expert in a community of practice as more of a mentoring than a teaching role. But the mentor also allows the learner to attempt the task rather than being directive (see also Guile and Young, 2001). As the new members move toward their full participation, they have a greater sense of belonging and their identity also becomes bound up with mastery of that practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In this sense the development of identity and learning are inseparable.

### **Boundaries and Peripheries**

Boundaries and peripheries are important to the communities of practice framework. They are closely related as they both refer to the edges of the community but emphasise different aspects. Boundaries are about where the community stops, keeping members in and non-members out. The boundary forces members, on the boundaries, to think about what it means to be part of one community and not members of another. For example a student may want to be part of a community which has an interest in a particular sport



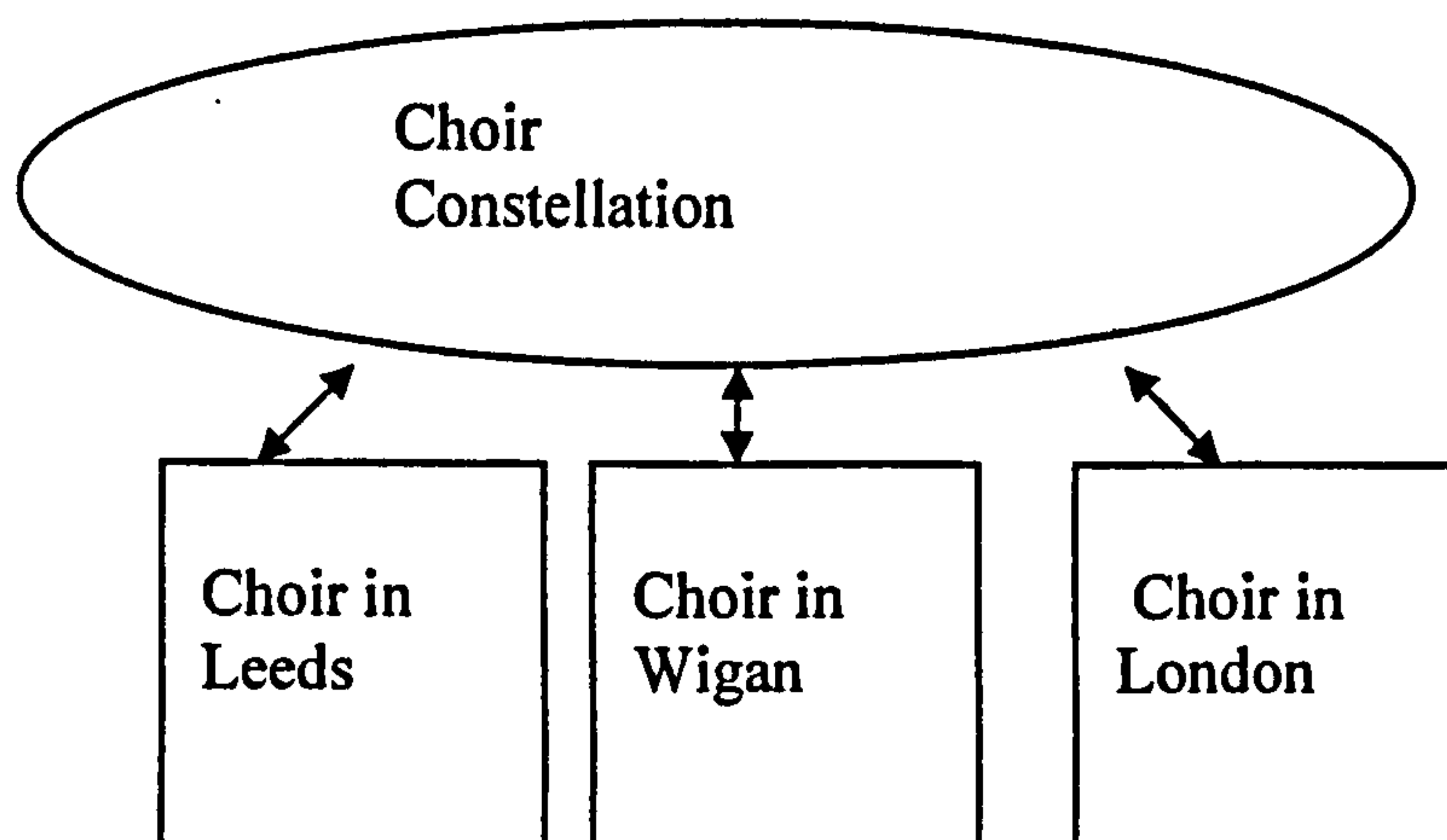
but not want to play that sport. That person will have to find another way into that community (perhaps by helping with training) or remain a non-member. Being at the periphery means acceptance that the person has some legitimacy to join that community and can move toward the centre if they choose. People may choose to remain on the periphery of a community for many reasons, for example because they don't have time to get more involved or because they are only mildly interested in the community's area of practice.

### **Constellations of Practices**

Wenger (1998) has a mechanism for communities that have the same joint enterprise but are too far removed from each other for the participants to engage and thereby be treated as one community. Each community can be a member of a constellation related in a number of ways, for example by sharing history, related enterprise, facing similar conditions, having members in common, sharing artefacts, being close geographically, having similar styles or competing for the same resources (Wenger, 1998).

So for example, our choir could be in a constellation of choirs in a national group, say the National Association of Choirs. In schema form the situation might look like this:





In this schema the oval represents the constellation made up of choirs in Leeds, Wigan and London. The individual choir communities of practice are represented by the rectangles below. Through this schema of the levels of practice, we can see that one of the assumptions about a community of practice concerns geographic location. While it is not necessary for all the participants in a community of practice to be geographically close, it is expected that geographic proximity will enable communities to flourish. Those communities of practice with members who are not in close geographic proximity will have a much harder time surviving. Having said this Wenger (1998) acknowledges that relations of locality, proximity, and distance do not necessarily have to be tied to physical proximity. Therefore it is possible for communities of practice to be closely allied despite the participants not being physically close to each other. Further the constellation is able to link communities of practice that share their joint enterprise. This level is able to give a fluidity that is not enclosed by physical space.

There is also a continual co-existence and inter-relationship between the local community of practice and the constellation such that they continually shape each other. Participation takes place, for Wenger (1998), at a level of communities of practice. It is here that people experience their daily lives. The local communities of practice have a relationship with the constellation such that participation in the local community of practice will be affected by how people see themselves connected to the constellation. Therefore participation in a community of practice will entail some work trying to make sense of how the community of practice fits into the broader scheme of constellations and how individual members of the community of practice relate to this. In terms of communities and constellations for individual members there may be overlap as individuals may be members of both communities of practice and constellations whose joint enterprises overlap. For example there may be a conflict of interest for people who are members of both a local community of practice for example, a choir that meets locally, and a global constellation, a national choral organisation. The national organisation may take on the role of advisor to the local choirs. This relationship may be mutually beneficial. However, as members of both a community and its constellation, people may find they have conflicting interests in times of disagreement between these two.



## *Communities of Practice and Education Research*

There is precedent for the use of the community of practice framework with regard to education research. It has been used in many different areas of education research, for example to help understand new forms of teaching (Sullivan, Shirley, Ford and Brown, 1998; Knight, 2001) and to explain the relationship of non-native English speakers to English academia (Flowerdew, 2000). The framework has been used to look at the strengths of ideology within the teaching profession and it has been used to better understand teacher training (Little, 2001; Maynard, 2001). Ball (2005) uses the community of practice model to look at informal learning in trade union education, trying to explain how the social context can mediate transforming perspectives in the learner.

There have been some moves to use the community of practice framework as laid out in Lave and Wenger (1991) to build a methodological consensus within educational research as a whole (Feuer, Towne, and Shavelon, 2002; A. Edwards, 2002). In this context, communities of practice have to be seen as part of the development of theories of situated learning (Scott, 2001) and created in reaction to individualised psychological theories of learning and intelligence.

Hammersley (2004) has criticised the depths to which this has been carried in an attempt to compensate for previous theoretical imbalances. He feels



Feuer et al (2002) and Hodkinson (2004) have gone too far in attributing “excessive value” to social learning. Hammersley (2004) goes on to say that the consequence of over reliance on knowledge gained in a community of practice is that it implies that propositional knowledge takes second place to narrative knowledge gained through practice in a community of practice. The criticism loses relevance as you move away from educational research that relies on propositional knowledge and toward research that relies on narrative/life history methodology, such as this one.

Another area in educational theory where the community of practice model has been applied, that is particularly useful for this study, is with regard to new computer technologies in education. R. Lewis, 1993, George, Iacono and Kling, 1995, Steeples and Goodyear, 1999, Lauzon, 1999; Mclure Wasko, Faraj, 2000 and Moule, 2003 all argue for communities of practice as a framework to be used to help understand the different uses of new technologies with regard to education. Johnston (2001) argues that on-line communities can have all the attributes of a community of practice and have some advantages over face to face communities. Because members cannot see each other, traditional group problems do not dominate as much as they would in a face to face environment. This allows for greater individual control. Further, “virtual communities exist according to identification with an idea or task rather than place” (Johnson, 2001, p.55). They can therefore be very fluid with no need for concrete boundaries. This allows one area of mutual engagement found in this study to be included as evidence of

membership of the home education community of practice. This will be further discussed later.

It is interesting to note that Wenger himself has moved away from educational research into business studies. He now mainly investigates business effectiveness (Wenger, 1999, 2000, and 2001; Wenger and Snyder, 2000). Some literature in this area focuses on creating communities of practice to better organise businesses and better harness the potential of the managers and workers (Brown 1998; Kulkarni, Stough, and Haynes, 2000). That the notion of communities of practice has become mainstream in this field is shown by some writers using the term as standard vocabulary with little need to explain or define it (Pelle and Briner, 2001; Gold and Watson, 2001).

### **Power Relations within a Community of Practice**

Lave and Wenger (1991) and later Wenger (1998) have been criticized for not including some analysis of the areas of how and where power relations can occur in the communities of practice model such as between old timers and newcomers (McGregor (undated); Little, 2001; Paechter, 2003b and 2006). Hayes and Walsham (2001) suggest that newcomers' motives for joining the community of practice must be examined if the power relations within the community are to be neutralised. They suggested the use of two enclaves, 'political' and 'safe', to help deal with the power relations in communities of practice. Political enclaves are characterised by being social spaces "resembling public facades" (p.280). Safe enclaves, on the contrary, are



characterised by "allowing more intensive participation, participation ... as optional and not associated with surveillance" (2001, p.281). In safe enclaves individuals join, participate, and leave the community for personal individualised reasons.

Nespor (1994) criticises Lave and Wenger for their assumptions about the use of space and time within communities of practice. He argues that there is too strong a focus on face to face interactions in this paradigm. While Wenger concentrates on communities of practice that have distinct mutual engagement, my own study will seek to extend the community of practice framework to communities of practice that have little or no engagement, acknowledging and trying to find some way to incorporate Nespor's critique into the community of practice framework.

Nespor (1994) also criticises Lave and Wenger's ideas because he says they "ignore the fact that 'communities' aren't just situated in space and time, they are ways of producing and organising space and time and setting up patterns of movement across space-time: they are networks of power" (1994, p.9). Space and time are not neutral concepts, as Nespor points out. They are part of the culture of the community of practice and therefore communities of practice organise space and time and vice versa. This needs to be overtly acknowledged and analysed.

Billet (1998) has made some attempt to analyse power relations in communities of practice. Firstly there is the question of access to the



community. "An individual's access to and standing in the particular community of practice is likely to influence the nature of their participation" (Wenger, 1998, p.26). Once the legitimacy of a newcomer has been accepted, the old timers, who know the conventions, cultures and mores of that community, hold power within that community which they can exert over the newcomer when they join the community and during their 'legitimate peripheral participation' period. Having legitimacy signifies that there will be expectations about how a member is to perform in the community. The newcomer will learn through practice, negotiation and renegotiation of the joint enterprise and its meaning how to be a participant in that community and thereby move toward the centre of it (Paechter, 2003b). Part of joining the community of practice for the newcomer is internalising its culture and milieu as well as contributing to it. Difficulties may occur between newcomers and old timers because of those underlying power relations. For example, if a newcomer suggests a change in an established routine of the community of practice, despite the fact that the suggestion might be very intelligent and useful, it could be viewed by an old timer as a threat to their authority, and turned down for that reason. Further, it might be considered by the old timer as part of their role to initiate routines and not considered part of the newcomer's role.

Secondly, Billet (1998) suggests that the person's standing in the community will determine range of access to the activities of the community (see also Maynard, 2001). Therefore some people in the community will not be able to access certain areas of the community, e.g. if they are not part of an 'inner

circle'. Hayes and Walsham (2001) point out that the creation of communities without the recognition and neutralising of pre-existing power relations and hierarchies means that these 'forced' communities of practice will flounder (see also Hammersley, 2004). Wenger might agree and argue that the mechanism by which communities flounder is itself a mechanism for neutralising power relations.

The issue of power has been addressed to some extent by Lave and Wenger (1991) and then Wenger (1998). There are conflicts in communities of practice, Wenger (1998) concedes, but these conflicts can in themselves add to the health of the community by challenging it and pushing it forward. For example the old timers will have to re-evaluate and re-negotiate their position in the process of interacting and participating with new members. This keeps the community fresh and active. However communities of practice do not guarantee harmony. For example, they can become ossified and hinder progress.

### *The Community of Practice and Identity*

Wenger (1998) argues, as we have seen above, that communities of practice are all around us and we each belong to many. It is through belonging to communities of practice that we learn to be part of our social worlds. I shall be arguing that the primary significance of home education for many home educating parents is the taking on of a new identity in line with this practice.



Wenger's community of practice theory is particularly relevant and informative as he explains identity development as based on the reciprocal connection between the individual and the social groups, the communities of practice, to which they belong.

Wenger stresses that identity is formed at the point of connection between the individual and the external world. As opposed to early theories of identity implicit in the Enlightenment philosophical tradition which take the individual as the pivotal point of identity formation (Roseneil and Seymour, 1999), Wenger's theory holds that individuals are continually affected by their experiences of the external world and cannot be understood as entities apart from those experiences. Both sides of the equation, the individual and the social, are involved in the formation of identity. This relationship is not a simple one of action and reaction, by which the external world stimulates the individual and the individual reacts. This relationship is a complex layering and interweaving of the individual and their experiences of the external world, each informing the other to form a constantly shifting whole.

Wenger is not alone in readdressing how we view identity. The concept of identity has in recent years been seen as "an analysis of the self which is highly fractured, contradictory and shifting" (Hird, 1998, p.517). Hird (1998) analysed the attempts of mature students to make sense of their new place in society with regard to their reconciling differences such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, culture and age. Other theorists refer to shifting, open-ended notions of personal identity (Bhavnani & Phoenix, 1994; Alexander, 1996).



Alexander suggests, and Wenger would agree, that an identity is always in the process of 'becoming' and therefore never 'ends'. It is, however, a "constantly evolving process of multiple assertions, negotiations and contestations" influenced by inequalities of gender, race and class (Archer, Hutchings and Leathwood, 2001, p.46). In line with Wenger (1998) identity has been analysed in recent years as an evolving process of interaction between the individual and society.

### **Practice/Participation**

According to Wenger (1998), practice by the individual in the external world is the means by which the individual actively enters that world. It is as a result of practice in a community of practice, called 'participation', that identity formation happens. It is imbued with the qualities of a community of practice, that is, joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire. The example of a choir will further elucidate the attributes of the community of practice: a member takes on the joint enterprise of that choir (performances, for example), mutually engages with the choir (by going to rehearsals etc), and speaks the language of the choir (through jokes or knowing how other members of the choir take their tea). These activities define belonging to this particular community of practice.

Further, for Wenger (1998) identity formation is constantly lived in a situation. Identity formation becomes part of everyday lived experience. Returning to the choir example, it is through going to the choir, being at the choir and dealing with choir business, that being a member of the choir

becomes part of a member's identity. It is the lived business of the choir that makes it an identity-forming experience, unlike, for example, a routine visit to the doctor.

It may be argued that joining a choir community of practice is of a different order of magnitude to joining a home education community of practice, and that this will have different implications for identity formation. On a daily level the activities and emotional attachment could be very different. The constantly lived, everyday nature of home education, the continued responsibility and the consequences of the choice can make home education a significant choice for the parents as it involves both the future of their children and their own present family life. This also means this choice is more emotionally laden. In terms of the consequences vis a vis joining a community of practice this may mean that parents may be more likely to become more strongly identified at the beginning with the community due to the emotional issues involved in home education. But a situation could also be envisaged where a weekly evening class such as a choir was a person's whole social life, such that they were deeply emotionally tied to that activity. Therefore it is not the type of community of practice that holds importance but the member's relationship to it. While it can be assumed that most parents will be in a heightened emotional state when they begin to home educate their children and approach home education communities of practice, this will not always be the case. The interviewees in this study have all been home educating for more than three years and therefore, their original 'joining' worries can be assumed to have dissipated. This assumption

seemed to be borne out by the parents interviewed who did not mention problems associated with beginning to home educate as problems for them after over three years of home educating.

### **Negotiated Meaning**

For Wenger (1998), the process by which an individual's experiences are made relevant to their identity is through negotiating meaning. Identity is constructed through negotiating new meanings to experiences within the membership of social communities. That is, we define ourselves through participation in communities of practice and negotiate ways of being a person relevant to a community of practice. This happens through engaging in the community of practice and relating to other people in it. We come to an agreement which is confirmed through the smooth running of the community of practice. This negotiation can be overt or implicit. Again, through going to the choir, hearing the members talk and feeling the ease or tension that is inherent in the discussions and activities in the choir, a choir member will take in or 'negotiate' for themselves their own role in the choir community of practice and what it means to them and how it fits into their lives. In this way a member makes membership of the choir part of their identity.

### **Competence and Identity**

According to Wenger (1998) the concept of competence relates to the ease of being in and moving about a community of practice. When members participate in the enterprise of a community of practice, know how to recognise and engage with other members in the community and understand



the language of the community, they exhibit competence. Competence does not have to be self conscious or require an explicit self image or articulated identification with the community. Rather, it is lived or practiced, forming an individual identity; 'we know who we are by what is familiar, understandable, usable, negotiable' (Wenger, 1998, p.153).

For Wenger (1998) the three aspects of being in a community of practice, joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire, translate in turn into three new concepts, accountability, mutuality of engagement and negotiation of repertoire. The second set of concepts reflects the meaning of the first set but is concerned with the identity relations that are formed through being a member of a community of practice. They are measures of competence in a community of practice. Each will be examined in turn.

### *Accountability*

Wenger (1998) departs from the usual meaning of 'accountability' by defining it in a way which is suitable for his theory. For him, a member is 'accountable' to a community of practice when they have a certain focus or perspective which they use to make decisions and through which they understand their life. 'Accountability' refers to a member internalising the meaning of the enterprise and using this focus both to guide their actions and to interpret the world. They thereby exhibit their identification with the enterprise associated with a particular community of practice, by envisaging the world according to the perspective defined by the joint enterprise of that community.

Members of any one community do not all necessarily share exactly the same opinions within that perspective. In the choir example, while the members of the choir community of practice may interpret problems from the perspective of a member of the choir, they may not all come to the same conclusion. For example, one member may be angered by a chosen piece of music written for the choir by someone who is not a member of the choir. Their anger could be based on the idea that the composer does not understand 'how the choir works' being an outsider, and therefore should not contribute to the repertoire. Another choir member may also be unhappy with that choice of music but on the grounds that they do not think the piece suits the choir. A third member may be happy with an outsider composing for the choir and even feel more supported by the wider community thereby. They are all accountable to the choir's enterprise but have different opinions within that perspective.

'Accountability' implies that a member will actively live and interpret other areas of their life with the internalised identification of the community in mind. That is, the member makes the community's joint enterprise an integral part of their whole life. When a member is accountable to a community, by seeing his/her daily life through the filter of the enterprise of a particular community of practice, the member is actively and continually identifying with the community of practice. In the choir example, this might entail keeping rehearsal night free or, with regard to a member of a sports



team, devoting one's time to practicing the sport rather than being with friends.

### *Mutuality of Engagement*

'Mutuality of engagement' refers to showing competence in a certain community through developing ways of being together that further the joint enterprise. To go back to the choir example, choir members not only come to choir rehearsals and in this way literally engage with the other members of the choir, but they also help decide about the nature of these engagements, how often they engage, at which time and in what place. By playing this active role in the choir, identity with this community of practice is both exhibited and reinforced.

### *Negotiability of Repertoire*

'Repertoire' refers to the language, stories, jokes, references and history of the community and therefore, to some extent, refers to the memories of the community of practice. The continual use and communal interpretation of these aspects of the community become the members' own. 'Negotiability' means that members of the community come to an agreement together about the use and meaning of the repertoire. In the choir example, negotiability of repertoire would involve being able to understand, engage with and help to shift the language of the choir, as well as being part of and knowing the choir's history, jokes and stories.



From the choir example it becomes apparent that these three aspects of being competent as a member of a community of practice overlap in practice. Feeling at ease telling the stories of the choir community of practice is part of negotiating its repertoire as well as a way of mutually engaging. Equally, a choir member by considering the needs of being a choir member as part of their everyday life, such as planning their time around choir commitments, shows their accountability to the choir as well as some negotiation of meaning, finding a way for the choir to be part of their life.

According to Wenger (1998), identities are forged and maintained through showing competence in a community of practice. This involves the adoption of the perspective of the enterprise, engagement in its practices and participation with others in the construction of the language and history of the community.

### **Multi Membership of Communities of Practice**

Multi-membership of communities of practice is another aspect of a community of practice that can affect a member's identity. Because individuals are members of many communities of practice, engaging in different practices at any one time, and over time changing the communities of practice they are members of, their identity is in a constant state of subtle transformation as it is being negotiated and re-negotiated in a complex interweaving of the subjective self with the external world. In these different communities of practice we construct different aspects of ourselves and gain different perspectives. They all interact and influence each other and require

constant coordination. We need to reconcile these different parts of ourselves and therefore need to construct identities to include different meanings and forms of participation when communities of practice cross or overlap. This may involve tension for the individual and it is part of the work of identity formation to reconcile these tensions. Choir members have to reconcile all the communities of practice that they are members of with their choir membership; they have to have time to devote to the choir away from other possible communities of practice (such as other hobby clubs or work communities) and they have to reconcile other social communities of practice (such as church or volunteering) with the choir commitments.

The fact that the individual's relationship with the community of practice shifts all the time means the individual is living on a daily level with subtly shifting identity. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1996) agree with Wenger (1998), arguing that the patterns of our lives no longer follow traditional and well worn paths. We have lost the signposts and guides that once made life more predictable. Now the "normal biography becomes the 'elective biography', the 'reflexive biography', the 'do-it-your-self biography'." (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1996, p.157) This appears to give choice to the individual although Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1996) contend that it does not necessarily do so nor is this elective biography necessarily successful. In fact it means that modern life is lived in a constant state of risk, "a state of permanent (partly overt, partly concealed) endangerment" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996, p.157) due to the lack of stability, lack of consistent



identity and the necessity for constant change (see also Baron, Riddell and Wilson, 1999 and Baxter and Britton, 2001).

### **The Communities of Practice not chosen for participation**

Another important component of identity is exemplified by those communities of practice an individual chooses not to be a part of. Non-participation in some communities of practice is inevitable as there are so many communities of practice all around us that we cannot possibly belong to all of them. For Wenger non-participation in some communities of practice is as much a source of our identity as participation. He says “We define ourselves through what is familiar and what is not ...” (1998, p. 164). But crucially to this project, rejection of some communities of practice might be of greater significance to a person than acceptance of some other communities of practice. For example joining a non-religious choir might be used to make an important statement about oneself. This member of the choir community of practice has made a statement about what they are, how they want to live their life and what they identify themselves with, both through the positive joining of one community of practice and the implicit rejection of others.

This chapter has set out, in some detail, the theoretical framework that will be used to analyse and understand the situation of home educating parents. Some aspects of the framework will not be developed, such as those looking at how home educators join the home education community of practice, why some may remain at the periphery of that community of practice, and the



relationship between local and global communities within home education. This is partly due to the concentration of this study on those actively engaged and settled in their choice to home educate. The situation of parents who are long term home educators raises different questions from that of newcomers to home education or those not happy with the choice. For the most part, these questions will not be addressed here. These are areas that could be open for further investigation for both the development of home education research and the development of the community of practice framework.

### *Summary*

People reflect on their social world to determine activities appropriate to fulfilling their needs and desires, and their social world is then changed, even if only in a small way, by the performance of these activities. Individuals then have to re-analyse their position in the slightly different social setting. Due to this continual interaction, both the individual and society are in a constant state of flux. One mechanism where this dynamic is played out is in communities of practice. These are groups that coalesce around a joint enterprise (a common goal) who mutually engage (interact in some way) and create a shared repertoire (a common culture and language, history, stories and jokes). We all belong to many communities of practice. They are maintained collectively by the members through participation. Participation is a reciprocal process of creating the community while at the same time being influenced by it and learning from it. Legitimate newcomers learn to be part of the community through meeting with the old timers, who in turn are

changed by this process. Learning to be part of a community of practice decentres learning away from a 'master' to the community as a whole. This is how communities reproduce themselves and develop new meanings.

Boundaries between communities force members to define communities they are members of, and help to keep members in and non-members out.

The community of practice theoretical framework has been used in educational research, including looking at the use of new technologies and by Wenger (1998) in business effectiveness research. Criticisms have been levelled at community of practice theory. For example, it has been argued that it does not adequately take into account power relations inevitable inside a community and the framework lacks recognition of the non-neutral condition of space and time.

Wenger's (1998) notion of identity shifts the focus from the individual to the relationship between the individual and its society. Each can be talked about in terms of the other, but by talking about identity in terms of one of these, Wenger (1998) does not deny the other but illuminates it from a different perspective. The unit of analysis for identity consists in the process of the interplay between the individual and the communities of practice to which they belong, that is to say one's identity is a function of their interaction.

Identity is formed through a member's negotiation of the meaning of their experiences. That a member shares some identification with a community of practice is shown by their competence in that community making the



meanings their own, being at ease in and moving around the community, recognising competence in others and engaging with others in that community. This identification does not have to be conscious but is attributed through a second set of criteria that reflect the first set. These are accountability (allied to joint enterprise) which refers to interpreting and understanding the world through the joint enterprise of the community, mutuality of engagement (allied to mutual engagement) which refers to developing ways of being together that further the joint enterprise and negotiability of repertoire (allied to shared repertoire) which refers to interpretation and agreement about the community's language, stories, jokes and history. It is also important for understanding the identification of a member with a particular community to note which communities' members choose not to join.

With regard to home education, the community of practice framework provides a basis to begin to understand this daily lived experience of parents. How this framework relates to and helps illuminate the home education experience is the topic of the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5**

# **The Community of Practice Framework and Home Education**

In order to understand more clearly how the community of practice framework can help elucidate the state of home education, paradigmatic cases have been selected from within the home education situation. In this chapter it will be argued that neighbourhood home education groups can be seen as one form of home education community of practice in that the members share a joint enterprise of educating their children, come together at various levels, and share language and history.

However, the community of practice framework does not, in all respects, fit with the situation of home education. For example, some home educators rarely meet face-to-face but only engage through newsletters and internet sites. It will be argued that, despite not meeting other home educators, much of the daily lived practice and the joint enterprise of home education is shared with other home educators. This participation is sufficient for parents to fulfil the engagement requirement for being members of the home education constellation. It does mean though that some extension of Wenger's (1998) original analysis is required. Nevertheless the community of practice framework is a very useful way to understand the home educating parent's experiences and how they are affected by them, as it enables analysis of practice, communality and identity formation in a social setting.



Research in America suggests that neighbourhood home education groups are important to home educating families. Lyman (2000) states that in one survey of fifteen hundred home educated students, 85% attended a home education group or intended to join one. Barfield (2002) agrees. Although her study was small she found that fifteen out of twenty-one home educating families mentioned belonged to some form of home education group. Three of these were internet connections and five were called co-ops and may resemble the co-op described below. There has been no research into these groups in the UK but from advertisements in the national home education organisations, discussions on internet lists and lists in the independent home education press it can be surmised that there are many of these groups all over Britain and that they are used by many home educating families.

Neighbourhood home education groups are the clearest examples of a Wenger-like community of practice. The home education group is still an unusual community of practice because unlike other social organisations where this analysis is applied, neighbourhood home education group is not a well defined institution such as an office, hospital or school with formalised familiar structures. In the neighbourhood home education group there is no defined structure, no formal obligations, and no agreed way to do things. Each group will have its own version of the joint enterprise of home educating, its own way of engaging, and its own shared repertoire, with similarities between groups but unique differences as well. Therefore, each

neighbourhood home education group may be a discrete example of a home education community of practice.

In common with more traditionally organised communities of practice however, a neighbourhood home education group can explicitly understand and support the issues involved in home educating. Through the group, members engage together in negotiating the joint enterprise, initiate newcomers into the community and transmit the shared repertoire through the history, stories and lore of home education.

### *The Neighbourhood Home Education Group as an Example of a Community of Practice*

#### **The Formation of a Neighbourhood Home Education Group**

In general, neighbourhood home education groups begin with a few families who get together on a regular basis, as in Sarah's case discussed below. What families do at the group can take any number of forms. Typically, a parent begins to think about home educating and contacts a national organisation. This organisation puts them in touch with a local contact who tells them about other home educators and neighbourhood groups in their vicinity.

A neighbourhood home education group can be started by any family choosing a place, for example a park, advertising in the home education



press or on internet lists or by using a national organisation's contact list to phone or write to other families near by saying that on a certain day and time they will be there. Others may then come. They may go on to meet at each other's houses, rent a space in a church hall or a community centre or combine a social meeting with a trip to a swimming baths or sports hall. They may undertake educational visits to museums, concerts and so on, as well. The group may remain informal in nature with the purpose of the meeting being to socialise. It may develop into a more defined group with a narrower purpose. Examples of this include single activity group doing science or drama. This will depend on the needs of the families involved, the parents' capacity for organising the group and the changing requirements of the children.

### **Joint Enterprise**

The joint enterprise of a neighbourhood home education group can be seen in Alice's description of her experience with one neighbourhood home education group. As soon as she made the decision to home educate she felt that she needed to share the activity and looked for a neighbourhood home education group. She contacted friends of friends who were also thinking about home education and started a 'home club';

...and that was the beginning of our home schooling and it was the first time that I had other adults around that were interested in being with their kids, at home with them... (8.2000)

(The reference after quotes from the interviewees refers to the month and year in which the interview took place). They shared a joint enterprise of being with their children at home, and a way to practice, that is, mutually engaging.

Alice continues to say however, that after a while one of the main organisers wanted to make the group into a business, paying herself a salary to run the group. "She had a lot of agendas that had nothing to do with what we were trying to do and weren't really good for the group" (8.2000). Alice no longer shared the joint enterprise with other members of the group who were more business oriented. Alice left this group and joined another neighbourhood home education group.

Alice's experience with her neighbourhood home education group exemplifies the point that families enter such a group with some idea of how it can supplement their home education experience. Alice's first neighbourhood home education group supported her family for a time until the joint enterprise of the first group changed and she no longer shared it.

Stevens (2001) argues that each neighbourhood home education group is underpinned by the inner conviction of some of the parents involved. If there is a choice of neighbourhood home education group, the group the family chooses will reflect, to some extent, the family's style of home education. The group does not dictate the family's home educating style although it may influence it. The organisational structure of a group will reflect to some



extent the philosophical and educational beliefs of those involved. That is, they come to the group with some propensity towards a particular style of education and a philosophy of life. Parents may not feel confident in this style. Often the fact that a neighbourhood home education group has one style is not explicitly understood even by the group itself. Therefore, it can take some time for a parent to realise that the style of a particular neighbourhood home education group does or does not suit their needs.

### **Mutual Engagement**

Neighbourhood home education groups take many forms. The philosophical convictions of the parents in the group are reflected to differing degrees in the organisational structure and goals of the neighbourhood home education group. For example, parents who feel their children should lead the way in their own education would favour a neighbourhood home education group that allowed children the freedom to lead the way, as exemplified by Sarah's group described below. They would not be so happy in a more formally organised group where the children are expected to do certain things at a certain time whether they want to or not, such as Dinah's group, which has a timetable of activities. So while it is true that parents may learn what it is to be a home educator from the neighbourhood home education group, they may also choose a group because they come to that group already feeling some affinity with its underlying ideals (Stevens, 2001).

## **Shared Repertoire**

Shared repertoire is created through the participation of members in the community of practice. An example from a home education community of practice is the word 'schooly' whose meaning varies but refers in a slightly derogatory way to anything that the speaker thinks may resemble activities, behaviour or values attributed to school. Another example of shared repertoire and its re-negotiation can be seen from the home education history. When Education Otherwise (EO) first began, the title of the activity was often called 'home schooling', as it still is in US literature. This was unsatisfactory to many, as this label seemed to imply that the families' activities were the same as activities usually associated with a mainstream educational institutional setting, the only difference being the place these activities occurred. This was not the case for many families who saw the name, not just as an inaccurate description, but also a term that stood for educational values that the home educating parents were questioning. A more recent example of this can be seen from letters written in response to Mark Oaten MP's question to Jim Knight MP (Minister of State Schools and 14-19 Learners, Department for Education and Skills) about 'home schooling'. Several letters agree with the opinion of one mother who pointed out the difference between the two terms used in the UK and US: "... 'home schooling' is not the correct term to use in relation to elective home education here in the UK. 'Home schooling' is generally a term to describe a structured approach to elective home education in the USA. A less formal approach by USA parents is called 'unschooling'. HOME EDUCATION is the term used by UK home educators because it covers the



many and varied approaches that parents follow” (capitals in the original quote, Philip, 2006). Ms Philip’s letter is only one of several expressing the same opinion, illustrating an example of shared repertoire, the importance of using the correct term and the annoyance caused by those outside the community of practice using phrases when they may not understand their nuances.

### **Practice/Participation**

While engagement can vary from regular, continued and face-to-face participation in the community of practice to a low level of engagement in the form, for example, of a newsletter, participation in the home education community of practice concerns the education of the children on a daily, continual basis. It is this participation, together with some mutual engagement, that shows parents incorporating the joint enterprise of the home education community of practice into their lives. This will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

### **Learning**

As there are no articulated guidelines or practices for parents to follow, most will look to national organisations and/or neighbourhood home education groups for information, moral support and so on. Neighbourhood home education communities of practice are where many parents will learn much of what it is to be a home educator. Parents also learn from participation in a home education constellation outside of the neighbourhood home

education group, and through their daily practice of home education. They also learn from their children and from the activities the children do.

Learning is shared through the practice of the community either consciously or otherwise. Stevens (2001) sees the role of neighbourhood home education groups as helping parents make the “transition from [a state of] apprehension to commitment” (p.32). It is through the group, where new parents can meet and talk with those who are already home educating, that many parents become able to re-define educational objectives away from the mainstream education system and feel more confident about their choice. Therefore, it is unsurprising that for many parents, before the transition to home education, the neighbourhood home education group is their first port of call.

In a home education community of practice the newcomer may encounter the apprenticeship model to some degree, with old timers seen as guiding newcomers. There is enormous variation in how parents feel as newcomers to home education. Some are confident and have a vision of what home education means for their family right from the start. Others search for a neighbourhood home education group or an expert or a ‘how to’ book. This procedure may be complicated by the fact that new home educating families may not yet be committed to a particular ‘type’ of home education. They may be open to suggestions and be influenced by the group they first approach. But this influence will only extend so far. As home education can encompass whatever type of educational style or underlying philosophy the family



choose, the parents can try a style for a while and see how it develops. They may change dramatically to a different style, or use combinations of many styles. The neighbourhood home education group also needs to be able, like the parents of the children, to address the families' needs with regard to educational support. The neighbourhood home education group will only be useful to parents so far as this is true, as Alice's case shows.

Emphasis in some home education communities of practice on independence and solving problems in one's own way will inhibit an obvious apprenticeship/master model. In fact it may be that what families learn from the home education 'experts' is that the way forward is up to them, independent from the others in the community to be discovered by each family without help from others. In this case, home educating parents learn to be independent of the home educating old timers, but paradoxically they learn this from and within the home education community of practice.

Parents do have help in this move to independence by seeing others ahead of them in the home education community of practice, succeed in their independent home educating. This success gives the newcomers confidence to do the same. There is also an issue of power relations between the old timers and the newcomers in the home education community of practice, as mentioned above. Van Galen (1988) reported that she found the home education community valued itself and promoted the idea of independence of mind in the choice of style of home education. This was so much so that insecure parents did not ask for help from neighbourhood home education

groups but instead used more anonymous sources in order to keep up the illusion that no help was needed in order to home educate.

### **Reification**

An example of reification in home education is the very use of the term 'home education'. It can be seen as reified in that it can stand for a multitude of ideas, lifestyle choices, a particular way of parenting children, educational principles and educational styles, all of which can vary between home education communities of practice rather than simply the fact of the children being educated out of school as one might think. The history of the phrase illustrates the difference between a name (a description) and a reified phrase, as mentioned above. It is possible that, in this case, the term 'home education' has become reified. In this sense, it may be seen as something to aspire to, strive for, a goal to be reached. However, the phrase 'home education' does not have to be used as a reified term. It can just refer, as a label, to the fact of not sending your children to school. It is very difficult to tell the difference between uses of the phrase in its reified form and uses as a simple description.

This lack of certainty about usage of terms extends to shared repertoire. It is not possible to tell definitively when parents are using 'home education' as a name and when they are using it as a reified form. It may be that an individual parent also uses the phrase differently at different times, for different reasons. Therefore confusion can be caused by use of the phrase in



its reified form (to embody certain principles and history) when it is taken in its more literal sense by a family who may not have those references.

### **Beginning to Home Educate and the Home Education Community of Practice**

Parents beginning to home educate have to deal with many areas of uncertainty. By implication parents are making some judgement about and challenging the mainstream education system; they may feel worried about the effects of this choice on their own career options or financial stability.

Home education means parents will have to take responsibility for the education of their children. This is an area that is usually thought to be the domain of experts. Friends, relations and the parents' community may be sceptical or even antagonistic. There is very little help regarding these matters. Withdrawing your children from the generally accepted educational institution may be perceived to mean isolation and certainly involves added responsibility.

This study does not specifically address the process of joining home education communities of practice, but looks at parents who are already well established as home educators and therefore are 'old timers'. However, some interviewees referred to how they felt when first home educating and how they have changed through their home education experience, both through the daily lived practice and their participation in neighbourhood home education groups.

Membership of any community of practice will be self-selecting (Wenger, 1998). If newly home educating parents - prospective members of a neighbourhood home education group - do not feel they fully share the enterprise of that group, they will look elsewhere for their home education support, as was seen in Alice's case. In this way the local coordinator of a national home education organisation, often the first point of contact for a prospective family, helps create and shape the particular home education community through being the 'gate keeper'.

Individual neighbourhood home education groups may also have a gate keeper who can employ a routine to welcome newcomers. One example of this is from Dinah's explanation of her group's welcome to someone new. (See Appendix 10 for an example of a 'new member's' letter). When a newcomer comes to this neighbourhood home education group, they are met and given

...a 'new member' paper that explains about the building, what our responsibilities are, to each other as well. And so we take them through that before they actually use the building. And we also say in there if you'd like to join on the internet or if you want to join up with the club or anything like that then these are the names of the people you want to contact. (4.2000)

Because there are not many home educators, the fact that a family chooses to home educate may be enough to entitle that family to membership of a



neighbourhood home education group. In this case, the parent's legitimacy, in the sense of being a 'legitimate peripheral participant', would not depend on any ideological alliance with the neighbourhood home education group but simply on their educating their children out of school. For the parents, because there are not many neighbourhood home education groups, proximity of the group may be more important than any ideological connection with it. Further, because these groups, as communities of practice, have the characteristic of being founded and run by their members, there is always the real possibility of shaping the group to suit the individual family's needs.

As time goes by, families' relationships may change toward the home education group. Sometimes parents, despite still home educating, choose to leave the neighbourhood home education group. They may have become more confident with home education issues or may have found a group of friends outside the neighbourhood home education group. As their children near the end of the home education life, the children begin to travel by themselves and have needs that can be satisfied in the adult and peer world, making the neighbourhood home education group redundant to the children and their parents.

On the other hand, there may come a point, as their children grow up, when parents' interests in home education issues wane and therefore they find

they have less need of the neighbourhood home education group. When Sarah's children reached a certain age:

[T]here was a natural hand over because you do move on. You find that somebody else has come along. They've got younger children so they're interested in organising things, doing a bit more that way anyway, so it's a natural progression. And there are people who are more actively involved because of having younger children who came in and became coordinators. (4.2000)

Sarah talks here about her trajectory out of the community. Others have taken over her roles so she felt the group would continue.

### **Types of Neighbourhood Home Education Groups**

In this study three distinct types of neighbourhood home education groups emerged. Despite differences of geography (where the groups are) and history (how they started), all three types of group exhibit features which exemplify a type of home education community of practice: a joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire, although the mutual engagement in each group is different. The first type is very well structured, timetabled and with some set curriculum, exemplified by Wendy's co-op. The second type is somewhat structured, with a time-table of traditional educational events and classes that families can choose to attend, exemplified by Dinah's timetabled home education group. The third type is Sarah's very loose social unstructured group. This group might have a traditionally structured



educational event or activity if the members of the group decide that is appropriate. Otherwise, they use the group as a purely social event.

Wendy described the first type of group, the co-op. She had four children between eleven and twenty-five years old at the time of the interview. She had home educated all four children for at least some of their school career. She is part of a 'co-op', which is a type of group that may be more common in the US, as it was only mentioned by the American home educators that I interviewed. Wendy describes their co-op as spending a year on a topic such as science or world history. One day a week, the children meet to follow one of the parents' planned academic activities around the topic. The co-op has maintained home education continuity for both parent and child. It gives a shape to the year for the whole family, provides social outings and engages in activities related to the study topic

Wendy's co-op is a large part of her life. She describes her best friends as the "four or five other home schooling mums that I have co-op'd with since the oldest ones were little" (8.2000). The co-op, for Wendy, gives shape and purpose to her week. Wendy felt the co-op mirrors life by setting external goals that the children must fulfil such as deadlines and makes them accountable to someone other than their parents. This type of co-op requires a big commitment. It must come first in families' schedules, for example they plan holidays around it, but Wendy felt that the benefits were such that the families are happy to do that.

Wendy's co-op style of group is the most formal and has the most structured mutual engagement of the neighbourhood home education groups I have encountered. Mutual engagement is through the organisational meetings, regular weekly meetings of the whole group and the social parties that surround the co-op. Their shared repertoire is created through this project. Wendy exemplifies shared repertoire when she says the co-op parents refer to certain academic work as "the Barnum and Bailey stuff" (8.2000), echoing Wenger's example of the claims processors use of the term 'voids' to refer to a particular set of forms (1998, p. 20). The members of that community of practice know what they mean by that phrase. This community of practice is particular to these families and seems to suit Wendy very well, fulfilling everything she expects from it.

A second type of neighbourhood home education group, which operates with a looser format than a co-op but still has a subject oriented set of activities, is the timetabled group. For example, in Dinah's home education group the mutual engagement takes place through a complicated schedule of activities (See Appendix 11) deriving from a combination of traditional school style subjects such as science days, and special interest meetings such as babysitting classes. The group meets in a designated room where they can plan new activities and store resources, some of which were bought communally with grant money. They also meet outside this space to engage in activities such as ice-skating and working on allotments. The commitment required to be a member of this group is much less than for being a member of a co-op. Families can attend for only short periods of time with no



requirement to attend any of the timetabled activities. In fact, families can choose to join only in activities that carry little traditional educational weight, such as ice-skating. Nor is there any need for the families to share in the organisation and planning of the group's activities.

The third type of neighbourhood home education group, in which mutual engagement is based primarily on social activities and which is relatively informal, is the unstructured group. This type of group, according to Sarah, encourages participation relevant to each family:

It wasn't that everybody did everything. Some people wanted to share and/or learn a particular skill. So it was kind of offering a group framework where people could come and go as they wish and could offer and take as they wished various aspects. (4.2000)

The mutual engagement in this group is very spontaneous and the time spent together is unstructured. Sarah again:

It was quite informal right through although more and more things developed from that. We met up, had picnics once a week did different things and also tried to encourage people who had something that they had to offer, whether it was doing something with painting or whatever. (4.2000)

There was no formal structure to this group and there were no written guidelines about activities or behaviour. They did have a telephone tree (this group existed before the days of easy internet access) through which they could inform each other of events even at short notice. The informal structure was maintained through a shared responsibility for the group. Sarah said: "... everybody sort of chipped in really" (4.2000).

In the unstructured home education groups such as Sarah's, mutual engagement takes place through telephone calls and meetings. This type of organisation takes a lot of time and effort but it also means that members are constantly in an active process of forming the community. Sarah does this by being available to others through being the local home education contact and generally helping to facilitate the group. Shared repertoire is also informally maintained as there are no written rules or guidelines from which a newcomer could learn. New members learn by participating in the group and learning its structure as they go along, joining the community of practice as they do so. In turn the newcomer can help to create new structures and 'rules' different from that of the old timers to the established ways and practices. This process was particularly clear in Sarah's case when she was a newcomer, she took on the main contact role of the community because no one else offered to do it. This meant that she, as a newcomer, was finding out about, and at the same time developing, the community's structure and repertoire when she talked to parents thinking about joining a neighbourhood home education group.



There is a fourth type of home education group that should be mentioned only briefly, as it was not exemplified by those involved in this study. This is the home education internet chat list. This type of group, it will be maintained, is still a community of practice. As mentioned above there is already a precedent for internet chat lists to be considered communities of practice (Johnston, 2001). They have all the attributes of a community of practice (a joint enterprise, support and information about home education, mutual engagement although not face-to-face but through meeting online, and shared repertoire) and this is developed through practicing in an immediate way by its participants. While it is not possible to further develop this in this study, the explosion in the number of and use of home education internet chat lists should make them of interest to future researchers both of community of practice theory and of home education.

### **Developing Criteria for Types of Mutual Engagement**

Described above are four different types of home education groups: the co-op, the time-tabled activity group, the unstructured group and internet chat lists. These home education communities of practice hold a common joint enterprise of educating their children at home. They mutually engage through formal, informal or internet means and maintain a collective shared repertoire. They all have a high level of mutual engagement, which is frequent, immediate and mostly face-to-face.

There is a further type of engagement practised by some home educating families who do not meet regularly on a day-to-day basis with other home

educators. This involves a second level of engagement, which will be called 'sporadic engagement'. Sporadic engagement could take the form of face-to-face engagements at camps and meetings, which are held nationally throughout the year. These events can become very important to some families who spend their time going from one home education camp to another, often returning year after year. Going to these camps and festivals provides a chance to join with others in the joint enterprises of educating the children, meeting friends, finding support for home education, discussing problems, and so on. They are attended by some who have little or no contact with each other except through these national level meetings.

The mutual engagement is face-to-face and the shared repertoire is maintained through catching up on the 'gossip'. This all helps to boost parents' confidence, and reassures them that they have made the right decision by home educating and thereby help them to reaffirm their commitment to home education. This type of engagement allows members to be quite independent from each other during most of the year, giving the individual parent freedom to pursue home education in the way they consider to be best for their family, while still being part of the community.

A good example of those for whom sporadic engagement with the home education community of practice is preferred was from Alona. She chose not to attend a neighbourhood home education group because although she enjoyed the visits when she did go, Alona felt happier devising her own pattern of life:



I found to a certain degree it's nice to go and visit [the neighbourhood home education group] but then I have so much I want to do with [my children] anyway that's got nothing to do with anyone else. So I tend to centre my time around them and what they're interested in. Rather than bringing groups into what I'm doing. (7.2004)

However, this family also enjoys spending their summers visiting different home education camps and festivals: "I like to go to camps. ...I tend to just do that. We're going to go off somewhere or go do something. One week to the next is just so different." (7.2004)

Sporadic engagement can also take place with the neighbourhood home education groups. Charlotte's family only attends the home education group when the group is doing something that interests her children:

[We] don't go to them very regularly. I kind of pick and choose a) if it suits us and b) if it's something the children want to do. We've got the schedule and my daughter and I look at it and we say what we fancy. (8.2004)

### **The Home Education Constellation**

Before we go further in trying to understand the relationship of parents who do not engage with home educators face-to-face, and who do not subscribe to the home education community of practice framework, it is necessary to look

again at Wenger's concept of the constellation and its role in the framework. To fully understand the different levels of engagement that were analysed from the point of view of the participant, it is necessary to analyse them from the point of view of the structure. The home education constellation consists of two levels of membership. The first level involves individual members who relate to the constellation through various means such as newsletters and internet sites. Usually these individual members would consist of both parents and the children who share the aim of home education communities of practice to engage in the daily-lived practice of home education, and who share the repertoire through some engagement with a home education community of practice. (The membership is not necessarily made up of whole families, as some individuals in a family may not participate in home education, such as a sibling who is attending school or a parent who is not involved). The individual members could join a community of practice at any time because they would be recognised as legitimate peripheral participants of the community if they chose to go to a neighbourhood home education group and in turn they could recognise others as members of the community.

The second structural level of membership in the home education constellation consists of groups that fulfil the requirements to be communities of practice such as neighbourhood home education groups (whether co-ops, time-tabled or unstructured) and internet chat lists.

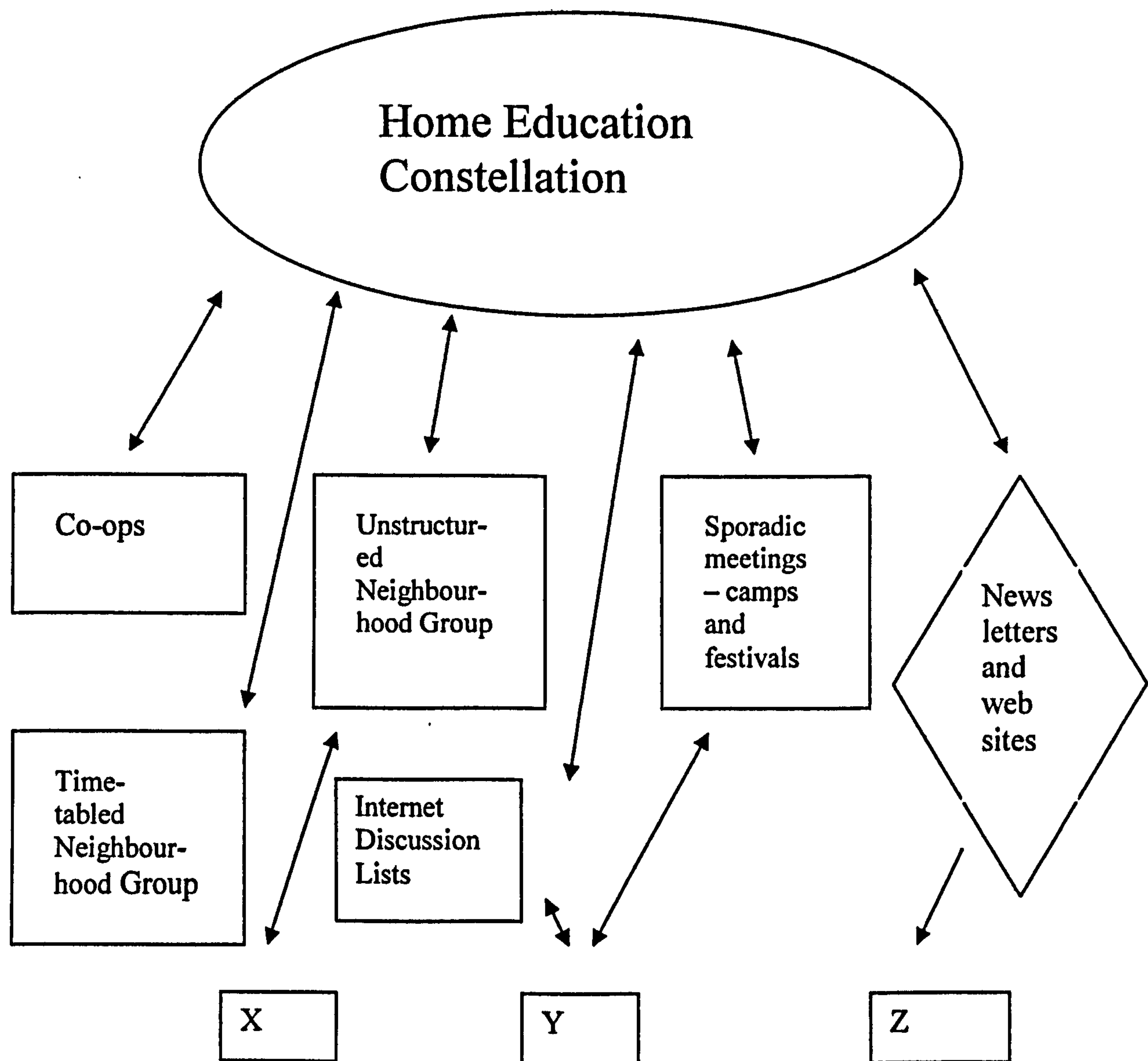
The third structural level of the constellation of communities is an abstract entity - a construction encompassing all the possible relations between the



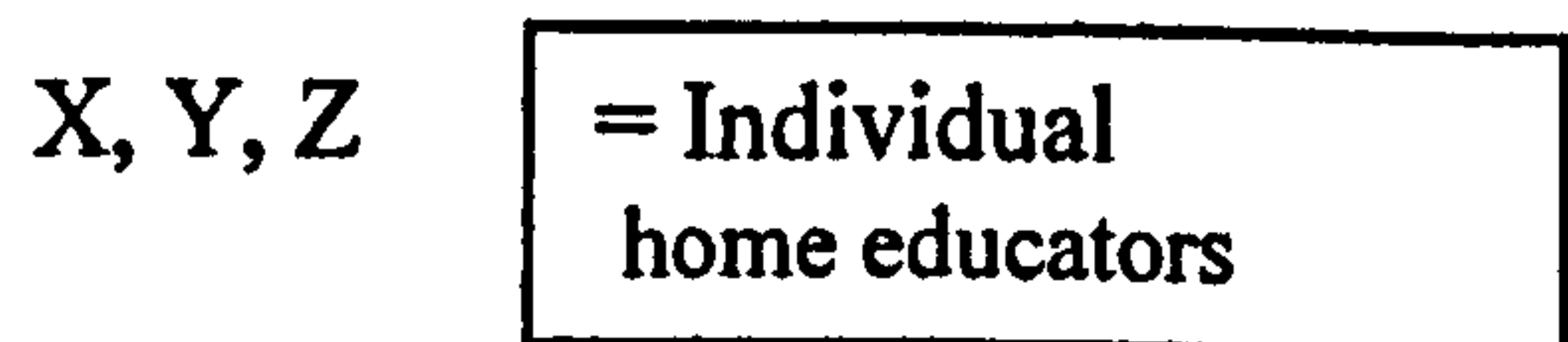
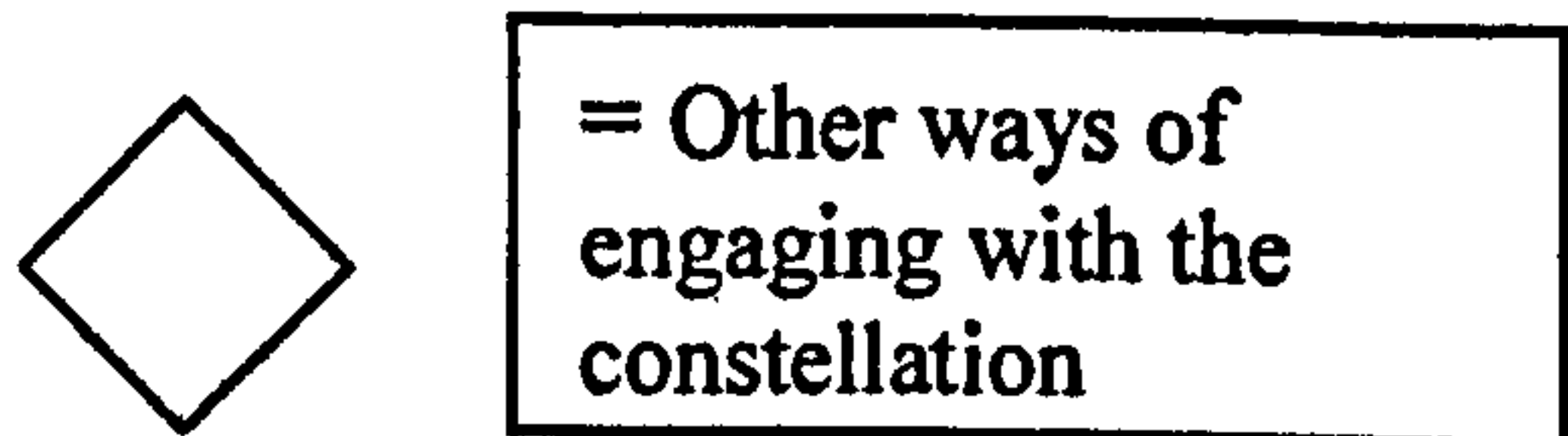
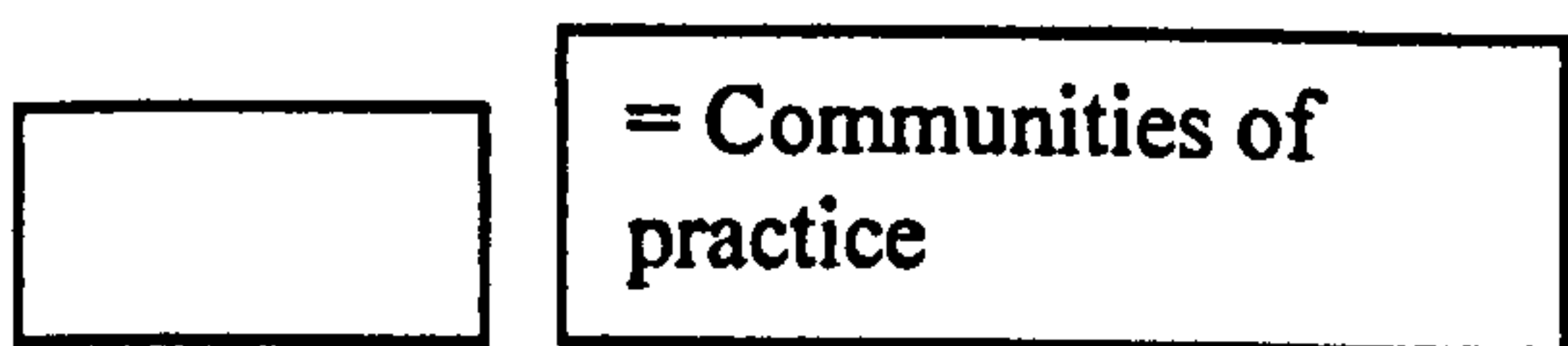
members. The neighbourhood home education group is just one way of belonging to the wider constellation of home education. The constellation could also function to encompass home education practitioners who choose to by-pass the neighbourhood home education group and instead relate only through newsletters or internet sites.

A schema for the structure of the different levels of the home education constellation would look like this:

Schema of the Structure of the Home Education Constellation



KEY:





A third level of engagement takes place when parents neither regularly attend any neighbourhood home education group nor even sporadically engage with other home educators. This requires an extension of Wenger's (1998) original model of mutual engagement and will be called 'minimal engagement'. For such parents, engagement with other home educators is so minimal, they may not ever meet face-to-face and engage only by reading home education newsletters or visiting home education internet web sites. Home education newsletters and web sites are not in themselves communities of practice because while both support the joint enterprise of education and may facilitate mutual engagement, for example through advertising neighbourhood group meetings, they do not provide immediate, direct or two-way interactive engagement. They are best considered to be reified parts of the home education constellation. Newsletters consist largely of anecdotes written by parents about home education, news about home education initiatives at local and government level, legal advice, help with exams, educational activities and so on. This contact is, for the most part, one sided in that while readers can respond by sending letters to the publication, they usually do not. Further, if they do send something to be published in the newsletter this involves some time delay. This time delay can be considerable as, for example, EO publishes its newsletter every two months. A letter sent to the newsletter may take four to six weeks to be published. Internet sites, a more recent resource, can also offer anecdotal information, legal advice or educational ideas and activities and also consist of one-way engagement.

Considering those who have only engaged with other home educators through newsletters and internet sites to be members of a home education constellation while not members of any home education community of practice, strains Wenger's (1998) model perhaps to the limit. This extension of the framework posits that there is a continuum in the levels of engagement for home educators. In the loosest relationship, members live quite separate lives and may not engage mutually at all. However, their participation in the constellation is based on a common enterprise involving daily practice and shared repertoire learnt and developed through the home education press and websites. It is also the case that there would be mutual recognition of each other as home educators when and if they do meet. Despite their loose engagement, there is enough communality in their day-to-day lives to allow these parents to be considered legitimate participants in the greater home education constellation.

It is being maintained that home educating parents who have little or no face-to-face contact with other home educators can still be considered full members of the home education constellation, partly because if and when they meet other members of home education communities of practice, they would be accepted as legitimate peripheral participants of that community. Similarly to Freemasons or football fans and other interest groups where the members do not all know each other, there are signs through which people can recognise previously unknown home educators as legitimate members of the same constellation (Wenger, 1998, Paechter, 2003a). In the case of home educators, sharing the enterprise by engaging in the same daily practice of



educating their children at home is the crucial criterion by which each is known and accepted. The act of withdrawing children from school is an example of a “performative act of legitimation” (Paechter, 2003b, p.544), meaning that, despite little or no previous contact, through this similarity of the home education lived experience, home educating parents recognise each other as members of the same community, and as sharing a joint enterprise and repertoire.

An example of this minimal level of engagement is Sophie who chose not to join a neighbourhood home education group because it was difficult to fit into her schedule and because she considered that her views of parenting were not in agreement with the views of others in any group. She felt the only reason for joining a neighbourhood home education group would be to find friends for her children, but since they had a full social life without a neighbourhood home education group it was not necessary to join.

We haven't, for the last three years, been trying to get together with other home schoolers. It didn't work very well because I was very aware that I was working extra hard the rest of the week to get this one day free. And I had problems with some of the behaviour so I decided, well, I would stick with what I had around here which is my friends and family. (8.2004)

Sophie is aware of the neighbourhood home education group network and the similarities of her educational practices with other home educating

parents, but she does not require face-to-face meetings or mutual engagement with them. However, she can still be seen as a member of the wider home education constellation due to her sharing the same joint enterprise, engaging in the same daily practice of educating her children and being qualified to join any home education communities of practice if and when she should choose. She would immediately be recognised by other members of the community as someone who 'belongs'.

Cathy did not join a group because she said she found her neighbourhood group unwelcoming and felt it would be very difficult to feel comfortable with so many people:

There are just so many people in the group that it's just overwhelming. When we went along I just thought, you know, we're going to have to come here for weeks and weeks and weeks before we even learn people's names. (8.2004)

Although she was aware of home education groups and knew that her home educating practices were similar to theirs, Cathy still preferred to follow her personal way of practising home educating.

Maggie's family stopped looking for neighbourhood home education groups after experiencing unsuccessful attempts to run one at her home. She said that she felt it was her own assumptions about what her children needed socially that prompted her to start a neighbourhood home education group.



After a while she realised her children did not need the group. She continued:

I left it alone. And I thought so we go a week without doing very much with other kids, does it matter? I know they're perfect socially OK and perfectly competent and they'll ask me if they want [to go out or have friends round]. (7.2004)

The needs of Maggie's family could be satisfied without the use of a neighbourhood home education group. Despite rejecting these groups she could still be considered to be a member of the home education constellation due to sharing the joint enterprise and common practice of home education, and being able, if she chose, to join home education communities of practice. Again, she would be instantly recognised by other members of the home education community of practice as a home educator.

Sophie, Cathy and Maggie show that it cannot be assumed that home educating parents will feel the need to join a neighbourhood home education group. Nevertheless, it must be noted that most of the parents that were interviewed answered an advertisement placed in the home education press. Therefore, despite differences in engagement, most families exhibited their connection to the home education communities of practice and/or the constellation in this way.

From the point of view of this study, one of the strengths of Wenger's community of practice model is that face-to-face meetings, although the norm, are not necessary for a community of practice to exist nor for someone to be a member of a constellation. Although some sort of participation is necessary in order to belong, it does not have to be face-to-face or interactive. Wenger says that those who live far apart can become members of a community of practice "after sustaining enough mutual engagement" (1998, p.130). Internet sites and newsletters could be interpreted as a form of engagement for home educators which enables them to count as members of the home education constellation without involving direct contact. Evidence from this study shows that there is 'enough', even if not mutual, engagement for these parents to be part of the home education constellation. Firstly, they found out about this study from home education sources. Secondly, they were willing to join this study. And thirdly, they employ the shared repertoire of practising home educators and learn the repertoire from newsletters and websites.

Engagement in the home education constellation ranges from those least engaged (who only receive newsletters or visit websites) through those attending annual camps and gatherings, and on to those who regularly attend a neighbourhood home education group or any combination of these engagements. Families change their type and frequency of engagement during their home educating life due to the changing needs of the family.



There may be a home educating family who have nothing to do with other home educators, who do not read any specific home education literature, who are not a member of any neighbourhood home education group - virtual, local or national - and who do not go to any home education events.

However, there was no such family in this situation in this study. Assuming such a family were open to being part of this research, they would not be able to find out about it. They would not be members of the home education constellation until some evidence, such as shared repertoire, was found.

Despite this, given that they crucially pursue the daily lived practice of home education and given that they share the home education joint enterprise, they would still be accepted as legitimate participants of a home education organisation once they make themselves known as home educators.

### *Summary*

Each home education group, either at neighbourhood or national level, has its own unique construction which is created by and reflects the specific needs of those involved. Three different types of home education communities of practice have been described here exemplified by three neighbourhood home education groups: the co-op, the timetabled group, and the unstructured group. There are also two notional groups in national camps or festivals and the home education internet discussion lists. While members of the groups may share a joint enterprise of educating their children out of school and develop a shared repertoire, the level of engagement of the members of these home education communities of practice varies widely.

While membership of a neighbourhood home education group is the typical way that families who home educate mutually engage, it is not the only way. It has been argued that there are at least three levels of engagement in the home education constellation for home educating parents: the first and most usual level of engagement is the neighbourhood home education group, the second level is sporadic engagement at national level in camps, clubs and visits and the third minimal level of engagement involves engagement only through newsletters and websites. In this last category, members are not part of a home education community of practice but only members of the constellation. It was necessary to extend Wenger's (1998) original framework to accommodate this minimal level of engagement undertaken by some home educating parents and allow them to count as members of the home education constellation. They demonstrate the same characteristics as members of a community of practice through following the joint enterprise in their daily practice and sharing the same repertoire.

The advantage of Wenger's (1998) community of practice model is that it helps us to understand the structure of home education as situated in grass roots practices yet organised nationally through a network of groups. It describes and explains the mechanism whereby home education groups originate and remain active. It incorporates the notion of social learning, involving parents as well as children learning through activities in a social context. It also provides a framework for explaining change at the level of identity. This last topic, the relation of home education practices to the



identity of parents involved, is the central issue of this thesis and will be examined in Chapter Seven.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Other Aspects of Parents' Lives, Particularly in Relation to Career, Financial Status and Free Time**

It is being argued that home educating parents are members of a home education community of practice or constellation because they have practices in common, even if they are developed in isolation, around a joint enterprise, such that they would have recognised one another as being part of a shared community of practice if they were to meet. Significant changes for parents are those that affect parents at the level of identity. As identity is being defined in terms of the negotiation of practice in a social setting, that is to say, a community of practice or constellation of practices, it follows that practices that are not part of this community will not affect parents' identity as part of the home education constellation of practices. It might be assumed that some of these shared practices would be connected with issues such as those listed in the title of this chapter. Parents were questioned in the interviews about how they thought home education had affected the family's financial position, careers and work, time for themselves and personal interests. Contrary to expectation, it was found that there was too much variation to conclude that these were issues around which a home education community of practice or constellation could coalesce. This is not to say that these issues do not affect parents' identities. However, these effects cannot be said to be part of the home education community of practice or constellation because the effects were too varied and diverse.



## **Financial Circumstances**

Those interviewed described their financial situations in diverse ways.

Nineteen families had no financial worries as a result of their choice to home educate. This was for a variety of reasons. For example, two families were on state benefits due to not being able to work because of disabilities. Two parents mentioned being financially secure as their partner worked full time. Three parents who had the main home educating responsibility were able to work. Two were able to make money through home education. Seven found home education to be cheaper than the previous educational option they had for their children and three said home education had not changed their financial situation.

On the other hand, fourteen families said that home educating had a negative impact on their finances. For example, three parents said they had to work part time rather than full time due to home education, five struggled to meet home education expenses for things such as trips and educational materials, and one was not able take the children out as much as she would have liked as transport was so expensive.

However, attitudes to this lowering of income and the difficulties that this presented varied. For example, four parents thought having a lower income helped teach the children the value of money. One parent thought that a compensation for the financial loss was the opportunity to contribute time and effort to home education community. Nine parents changed their priorities altogether and considered a rich family life to be more important

than material prosperity. Some of these categories overlap, with the same parent being in two categories or having seemingly contradictory attitudes. For example Sue said she has always worked part time since the children were born but also said she had a husband who works full time and supports the family. Dinah felt glad that her children were learning the value of money due to the loss of her income but was also somewhat upset at not being able to work full time.

The variety in families' financial position and attitudes towards this financial situation becomes apparent. Some parents were better off after home educating, some suffered no financial hardship, and some suffered hardship but felt compensation in other ways. Others suffered hardship and found this a problem. Further, contrary to expectations perhaps, there were significant numbers of long term home educators who were single parents, five in this study. It might seem that the lack of a second parent able to provide an income would make home education impossible but in fact single parents were able to organise their lives so that home education was not only possible but successful. Nor can it be assumed that those in a stable relationship were able to have one parent steadily working outside the house while one parent was responsible for home education. For example, one family's low income was due to the father's disability.

Home education can have a positive or negative influence on a families' financial situation and is not always a significant factor in a family's home educating experience. The influence of home education itself on parental



practices and attitudes towards their financial situation ranged from parents feeling strongly that having less money was a problem to others feeling that having less money was a good thing for their children. Some parents were pleased to be saving money and others seemed to have no strong opinion about the relationship between home education and the family's' financial position.

### **Career and Work**

The term 'career' is rather emotive as it carries with it undertones of a life's work, that is emotional attachment and fulfilment, not simply payment. A 'career' ladder is also assumed, in which an adult can move upward, to positions with better payment, more responsibility and higher status.

Further, a career, as opposed to a job, suggests the worker is adding something to the world, fulfilling themselves and, at the same time, adding value to society. Careers require strong long term commitment, which can interfere with other life commitments.

Sikes (1988) points out that expectations, both social and individual, play a large role in defining our identity in terms of career and age. An individual may not feel ready for a particular shift that is dictated by his career structure based solely on his age. For home educating parents who have stepped out of any career structure, social expectations no longer hold the emotional force they may have for those within the career structure. Parents may find themselves with fewer career expectations based on their age than others who follow the mainstream paths. This can be liberating, allowing



parents the confidence to entertain activities and life choices another person at their age might not entertain. But it could also be isolating and upsetting as there are not many others on this life path, leaving parents with few ties to the mainstream and few pointers or instructions as to direction.

As with the issue of finance, there were almost as many practices with regard to career and work as there were interviewees. For example, of the thirty-four parents interviewed, two were not interested in paid work or career at all. Seven took part time work, as a type of compromise, as paid work afforded them some personal satisfaction (Schrecher, 1997; Warren 2004) through making some money and providing some attachment to the world outside the home while the part time nature of the work, allowed the family to have a stay-at-home mother for some time (Warren, 2004; Tizard, 1991).

Twelve parents interviewed had already decided to give up their career when they had children and the fact of home educating was incidental to this decision. Two others were not happy to have given up their careers in order to home educate. Seven considered home education be a career in itself. Three parents developed new careers while they were home educating. Five developed skills towards future careers, while they were home educating. Three of these took degrees. Three were considering future careers but had not yet begun preparing for them. The three fathers interviewed had full time jobs.

As with financial issues some of these categories overlap. For example, Cathy was not happy to have given up her career but was able, through home education, to change direction and find another career. Some of those who worked part time were glad to be working but did not see the work as a career and others who were studying part time had no specific future plans.

Of the thirty-four parents interviewed, thirty-one were mothers and three were fathers, a typical feature of home education (McDowell, 2000b; Lois, 2005). This situation may also reflect wider social roles where women still take on most of the child care, child care planning and school responsibilities (Department for Education and Skills, 2003a; Welsh, Buchanan, Flouri and Lewis, 2004). Home educating parents are not immune to the dominant cultural mores simply because they have stepped moved away from the mainstream in one area.

As so many of the parents who have prime home educating responsibility are mothers, issues of women and work are pertinent. In 2004, according to the National Statistics Website, there were almost twice as many men in the workforce of UK as women. Traditionally, it is not seen as being equally legitimate and necessary for women to work as it is for men (Sharpe, 1984; Charles and Kerr, 1999). Since usually it is mothers who have the responsibility for their children's social and moral as well as physical development (Phoenix and Woollett, 1991), working mothers can suffer guilt that by not being with their children they are causing their children harm (Delamont, 1980; Tizard, 1991). A working home educating mother may be



seen as firstly denying her children school and secondly denying her children her own presence. There is then a double social pressure on home educating mothers not to work outside the house.

It is also important that mothers balance their own needs (economic identity, independence etc) with those of the child. If mothers are not happy with their situation the child will suffer as well (Warren, 2004). Part time work and all the benefits that go with it are a real possibility for home educating mothers. Perhaps surprisingly, given the pressures on home educating mothers, several mothers that I interviewed managed to work part time while home educating; Sue, Lisa, Maggie, Martha, Beth, Sophie, and Jill all worked in areas where they had worked before home educating. Isenberg (2002) found a majority of home educating mothers in her study also worked at least part of the year, evidence that the situation of mothers in my study is not exceptional.

Women are seen as 'outsiders' when they have children. In researching mothers returning to adult education, Clarke (1997) found that the mothers had internalised this vision of themselves. She pointed out the contradiction of 'Women Returners' when "we want to validate women's domestic experience and yet the very notion of Women Returners locates women's domestic activity on the outside of the desirable place that we are encouraging women to return to"(p.5). Further, Ridgeway and Correll (2004) found that motherhood carries negative status with regard to women returning to work, making it more difficult for women to firstly, find jobs and



secondly, move up any career ladder once in employment. For home educating mothers their choice to stay at home locates them in a slightly different position. The home educating mother, who is happy with that identification, has chosen to be with her children and this is the seat of her desirable place. Higher education or any outside job would take second place to that of the relationships involved in the home education practice. This, as with any identification, is not necessarily constant but is another part of the mothers' identity that is constantly being negotiated.

Home education, even with its dimensions of deviance and non-conformism (to be discussed in Chapter 8), can give the home educating parent status beyond that of 'normal' parents who choose not to work. The parent who is primarily responsible for home education may also feel social recognition as an educator and carer for the next generation. For example Cathy felt her friends and family were critical of the fact that she wanted to stay home with her children. However, she felt the pressure to 'do something with her life' was lifted when her children reached school age and she 'began home educating'. It was home education that had given her work at home enough status that those around Cathy were able to accept her choice to stay at home with her children as a reputable and worthy one. As an educational decision home education confers credibility not normally available to a parent staying at home. Quality of life research asserts that paid work is one of the main contributors toward a satisfactory quality of life, along with financial security and time for oneself (Camporese, Freguja and Sabbadini, 1998). The experience of home educating parents shows that it is possible to obtain the

satisfaction of work outside of a career structure in some cases. The home education experience may even pave the way for Cathy to take up paid educational work as a teacher (Apple, 1984) after the children have grown up.

The three fathers interviewed, who all worked full time, did not consider home education to have in any way interfered with their work. Dominant ideologies of motherhood and fatherhood are very different, although it is also the case that not enough research has been done to understand the mechanisms and influences of fatherhood (Flouri, 2005). A father is expected to contribute financially to the household (Welsh et al, 2004) where a mother is expected to give up work outside the house and take care of household duties and the children (S. Lewis, 1991; Charles and Kerr, 1999). Men traditionally have not been asked to choose between parenthood and work outside the home as women have. Further, child rearing as it is now, with no pay and low status, is not a position men want to assume (Held, 1983; Richardson, 1993).

There are external issues that impinge on private family choices, for example, the fact that men can often earn more than women. There are other factors that inhibit men from real domestic equality such as the lack of automatic areas of participation for men in work at home and their lack of any role in the home or identification with it (Sharpe, 1984). This has the cumulative effect of making men seem 'useless' in the kitchen and it being easier for women to do the work themselves, thereby maintaining the different sex



roles. Equal parenting can only be seen against the backdrop of unequal social and economic structures and parents in their private arrangements can only go a certain way toward tackling these issues (Richardson, 1993). Home educating families are subject to the same pressures and constraints as the rest of society at the same time as they struggle to cope with forging new educational approaches on the margins of society. Being marginal provides different pressures that parents have to cope with as well as other pressures that all parents have. This will be discussed in Chapter 8.

The evidence from the data supports the contention that home educators do not conform to any 'home educating' career or work pattern. Attitudes to work and careers seemed to be shaped as much by wider social and gender issues as by home educating.

### **Parents' Time for Themselves**

What 'time for yourself' means to a parent is not clear and was left undefined in the interviews. Thus each parent was able to interpret the phrase in their own way, a way that was pertinent to them. Examples varied from studying for a degree or pursuing outdoor leisure activities to reading your own book in the corner of a room where your children are watching television. Although these activities may all be perceived as 'time for yourself' they are qualitatively different and have different outcomes for the parent.

Having one's children at home all the time, together with the huge responsibility of educating them, would seem to preclude the parent from



having any time for themselves. In addition, a view of children as being all consuming and difficult to handle is promoted by the popular press who, for example, write about how difficult it is to know what to do with children during the holidays. For many families the idea of having children with them all the time conjures up visions of whingeing children who are constantly bored and nagging for attention, as shown by this quote from the BBC Magazine about what to do with your children during the holidays:

But just as you can set your seasonal clock by the first cuckoo of spring, so you can adjust it to summer with the first cry from your offspring of 'Mum, I'm bored'. Summer holidays have a tendency to be a headache for all but the most patient, creative or, let's be honest, well heeled mums and dads out there (BBC News Magazine, July, 2003).

It might indeed be the case that children used to a highly structured and more authoritarian environment at school may find it difficult to adapt to a different routine at home during the holidays. Given this, it might be assumed that September would be a quiet month for home education help-lines. This would be a time when children were glad to return to the environment they know well, school, and parents would be happy to send them back there having spent the summer holidays trying to keep them busy. In fact, evidence, both anecdotal and from home education help-lines, suggests otherwise (G. Harrison, 2006). The statistics for EO show that the number of calls to the helpline rose by as much as 50% in the months of September from 2000 to 2005, dropping rapidly down again in October to the annual monthly average. This is a peak period for calls to these helplines and

other home education sources of information. One reason for this might be that during the long holiday period families have overcome the early 'nagging' period of their children and settled into a family routine that makes the idea of home education possible.

Given this popular idea about what it is like to have children at home all the time, mothers who choose to home educate may find little sympathy outside home educating circles for a lack of time to themselves. This choice may be seen as a 'rod for their own backs' by other mothers who cannot understand why they should sympathise with home educating mothers who could have more time to themselves if they sent their children to school.

Given the pressure on women to make the family a smoothly functioning unit (often placed on them by their own internalisation of what they perceive to be a good mother (Lois, 2006)), taking time away from the family for activities for their own pleasure or relaxation, is even more difficult than choosing employment (Mattingly and Bianchi, 2003). Being employed carries status and makes life easier for the family through improving its financial health. But parents who are taking time for themselves, while home educating, could be perceived as selfish and self-indulgent.

Some research points out that the relationship between mothers and children is better when mothers themselves are satisfied with their situation (Yarrow, 1962; Hoffman, 1974; Tizard, 1991). This is very relevant to any parent but particularly to home educating mothers, who have made a



conscious choice to include their children's education within the family's responsibilities. A parent not fulfilling their own needs and thus not satisfied with their situation, this research seems to suggest, might become unhappy and this would lead to deteriorating relationships within the family.

As with finances and career, there was a very mixed attitude to this issue. Seven parents said they made sure they got time for themselves in a variety of ways. Six parents said they felt no lack of time for themselves. Seven parents said that it was much easier to get time for themselves as their children got older. The attitudes of the eleven parents who said they did not have enough time for themselves varied. For example, one parent, with seven children, said she had no time to herself but that she was happy with her situation. Three parents said they did not have enough time for themselves but they knew this situation would soon change as the children grew up. Another parent said she had no time to herself and was not happy with this but said this was not to do with home education but with her situation at home. Another parent said she did not have enough time to herself, no matter how she tried to organise things, and this was one of the reasons she had sent her children to school.

The quality of the time was also important for families. Although parents might have had more time for themselves if their children were in school, the quality of that time might have been such that it did not recharge the parent. For example, Annie talked about a term when her children were in school and she enrolled for a degree course. "To be honest it was a complete



nightmare. Desperately running around dropping people off, fetching them, working and then people being off school ill – I was exhausted” (7.2004). Nor can parents assume a fixed quality of the time for themselves. Having time without the children does not necessarily mean that a parent can use that time for their own interests. Having as little stress as possible was an important factor in the descriptions of quality of time for themselves.

It can be argued that if these parents were not home educating many of them would be at work either full or part time. It is not clear that parents would have had any more ‘time for themselves’ if they were not home educating. It has been documented (Sirianni and Negrey, 2000) that mothers who work still retain most of the responsibility for the household and child care and therefore have less time for themselves (Mattingly and Bianchi, 2003). Often, parents are at work during school hours or more and then come home and begin family responsibilities and work in the home. Wendy agreed, saying she has more time to herself now that she is home educating than when she was working in paid employment, even though she is home educating and her children have very different needs: “I really feel like I have much more time than if I was working even with [home education]” (8.2000).

Most mothers tend to be coordinators of family life and therefore it is often difficult for them to have time for themselves independent of household responsibilities (Mattingly and Bianchi, 2003). Is organising their child’s birthday party, time for the parent even though it may be enjoyable and involve the parent’s creativity? In home education, where parents may feel

the added weight of the responsibility for the children's education on their shoulders, they may be more tempted to put their children's needs above their own, feeling that this is what home education requires. This would seem to suggest that home educating parents have little time for themselves and are not satisfied with their situation. Therefore, as the relationship between the parent and children suffers, so the whole family would suffer. In this study it was found that parents deal with this potential problem in various ways.

Those parents, who felt the loss of time to themselves, did not necessarily think it was due to home education but due to changing circumstances, apart from home educating, within the family or to personal changes. The loss of time for themselves may signify that there needs to be a change in the organisation of home education in the family or indicate a developmental growth in the parent as their children grow older. As the children get older and require less from the parent, the parent may begin to look out into the world and wonder about their own place in it.

The age of the children was an important factor with regard to time for oneself, becoming easier to find as the children got older. This is as one might expect. Older children are more able to fend for themselves, fill their own time and organise their own timetable. In general it was thought by the parents interviewed that having young children is time consuming whether they are educated at school or at home. Maria, who seems to have found that her need for time for herself increased as her children grew older, may



be an exception to this. Maria's unease about time for herself may signify a newly developed need in her for more time or a need that had always been there but which she was unable to address until the children were older.

That is, some parents, as they see children growing older, they may find they grow to feel the lack of time to themselves which they did not feel before. In this case, it is possible that there was not a constant feeling of sacrifice of time for themselves when the children were younger but this feeling has changed as their children grow older. It could also be possible that Maria's feelings point to the fact that home education is not right for some families after a certain point.

In conclusion, 'time for one's self' is a very subjective issue and many attitudes were displayed. For some parents, finding time for themselves was not a problem. For other parents, even though such time was difficult to find it was not impossible, though in one parent's case not being able to find time for herself was a factor in her sending her children to school.

### **Parents and Personal Interests**

Time for oneself and personal interests are closely related, as time for oneself can often be used to develop personal interests, and conversely, finding time for personal interests fulfils some of the needs of time for oneself. It may be the case for parents that their home educating responsibilities take up so much of their time and energy that they do not have time for other interests. Also finding time for their personal interests is another area where the prime home educating parent may feel they are being self indulgent and be



reluctant to fulfil their private interests. Parents may choose not to spend any time resting or in non productive activities. However, from the parents interviewed, personal interests were mostly fulfilled. In fact, many parents said their interests were extended through home education in that they were now interested in areas they had not known about before.

Five parents said they had no problem fulfilling their interests while home educating. Seven parents said their interests were extended through the experience of home education. This was not always seen as a good thing. Cynthia felt her interests were already too broad and wanted to narrow them down. She felt she could not do this while home educating. Seven parents said their interests coincided with their children's so they were able to combine their own interests with home education. This was not true for all parents. Annie lamented that her children did not share her interests and she would have to wait to fulfil hers. One parent's interest had become home education itself. Some parents had adopted their children's interests, broadening their own and synchronising their interests with the children's at the same time. Six parents found it difficult to fulfil their personal interests. Of these six, four parents found this was not a problem because they saw the situation as temporary, while two of the parents were unhappy, one so unhappy that she stopped home educating. Other parents said they were willing to wait until the children had grown to carry on with their own interests. Two parents said home education had no effect on this area of their life.

## *Discussion*

While these areas of their lives were important to the interviewees, they exhibited different attitudes towards them and used different methods to handle the problems they faced. It can be seen that each family in this study, aside from one, is able, through the flexible nature of home education, to meet its own particular needs in its own ways. Parents seem to have worked out the various unique adjustments they needed to make so that they can feel broadly satisfied with home education. Due to this it is very difficult to make any generalisations. However, the main point is that finances and career - which, as they are important issues for all parents, might *prima facie* be thought to be significant and formative issues for home educating parents - were in fact, considered incidental to, rather than defining of, home education.

Further, the home education community of practice or constellation does not seem to revolve around the issues discussed in this chapter, as there are few shared practices. They were not deemed central to what it is to be a home educator. It can be concluded that there is no evidence to support the idea that the joint enterprise of the home education community of practice or constellation is based around any of these four themes. While the parents interviewed all share the joint enterprise of educating their children, they do not share, with regard to the above topics, any shared repertoire. While this may be surprising, it seems to indicate that the foci of the home educating

identity may lie in other areas such as being an educator. This will be discussed in the next chapters.

### *Summary*

It is difficult to generalise about how parents felt home education had affected their financial position, career situation, time for themselves and personal interests. No evidence of membership of a home education community of practice and constellation, with respect to these aspects, could be found. Even parents who happened to agree on an issue, such as those who found they had no financial problems due to home educating, had a diverse set of reasons explaining their attitude making it difficult to draw any hard conclusions. Those who found they had financial problems due to home educating were no more homogenous than those with no problems. In fact, some parents found these financial problems to be a valuable resource which they could use to educate their children; others found the situation difficult and emotionally draining and one parent gave up home educating due to the fact that she needed to find work. Similarly, some parents missed their careers, some found a new career through home education, some did not miss their career despite giving it up and some chose not to have a career,.

The different situation of mothers and fathers was discussed, as was the fact that so many of the interviewees were mothers. This may indicate that the roles and expectations of home educating parents, to some extent, mirror those of society in general, seemingly indicating that taking an unusual



course in one area of their lives did not make parents immune to social pressures in other areas. This was supported by the fact that the three home educating fathers interviewed found no real change to their lives due to being home educators.

Concerning time for themselves and their personal interests, again widely different attitudes were observed. Parents had been able to fulfil their interests, either through combining them with their children's, finding new interests that easily combined with home education, or in one case in home education itself. Others found it difficult to fulfil their interests but they mostly considered this unimportant and/or temporary.

The diversity of the findings with regard to interests and personal circumstances of parents considered in this chapter, show that it is very difficult to make any generalisations about parents' situations, especially to make the case for a home education community of practice or constellation. We have to turn to the other influences on parents that tie them to the home education community of practice or constellation. These are dealt with in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Applying Wenger's Identity Theory to Home Education**

Recently, identity has been theorised as a feature of 'the self' which evolves and unfolds throughout life. According to these theories there is not one stable, essentially coherent self, but a set of sometimes contradictory identities constantly being defined and redefined in various contexts (Rutherford, 1990; Davidson and Piette, 2000). The self is seen as "fragmented, saturated and diversely populated by identities that are imputed by the social world" (Deci and Ryan, 2004).

These identity theorists argue further that the content of identity has evolved due to the disintegration of traditional signposts for life such as class and gender. In their place are other social structures and forces that manipulate the individual. "The place of traditional ties and social forms (social class, nuclear family) is taken by secondary agencies and institutions, which stamp the biography of the individual and make that person dependent upon fashions, social policy, economic cycles and markets..." (U. Beck, 1992, p.131).

The community of practice framework places the process of learning and the acquisition of identity through social practice as central. Wenger talks of identity as "a way of talking about how learning changes who we are" (1998, p.5). In this sense identity is a self-reflexive understanding of changes in us caused by the social world at any one time. This framework can help explain



how home educating parents become identified with home education and come to see themselves as 'home educators'. Being a 'home educator' is just one of a number of possible changing identities a parent can have. Others might include relational identities inside a family such as parent or child, or even identities created through social interactions with friends or at work. It will be argued that some factors seem to be more important than others in the formation of an identity as a home educator. Further, home education requires parents to take on the huge responsibility of educating their children. This responsibility, coupled with the fact that parents are in a special relationship with their children, can create a highly emotionally charged situation for parents. It is the process of developing and experiencing home education identities and how the characteristics of the experience affect them that will be addressed in this chapter.

Identity, for Wenger (1998), is the linking of action and meaning. Identity can be changed and formed through sharing a joint enterprise and participating with others to further that enterprise. However, the joint enterprise of home education, in terms of it being a lived practice, is so significant that even those parents who do not meet face-to-face with other home educating parents can be members of a home education constellation, and can begin to identify themselves as home educators. Parents' identities change as they engage in home educating through educational activities and may face changes in their attitudes as they link meaning and action within the home education situation. When home educating parents negotiate new meanings

of education they may come to see themselves as educationalists. This is a profound change and a new facet of their identity.

## Negotiating Meaning: How Parents View Education

For Wenger (1998) identity develops when we negotiate new meanings through activity. In the context of this study 'education' is the main concept whose meaning is negotiated. Evidence that parents give new meaning to this term comes from those who begin home educating with one set of assumptions about education (even if they are not articulated) and go on to develop another set. I did not ask for clarification as to how each parent defined their model of education. Nevertheless, many parents made comments about changing from one model of education to another. Parents said that when they first began home educating they felt they should copy a school style of education. This involves such characteristics as a set structure to each week determined by external bureaucracies, each day learning specific topics at specific times in a specific place, a clear distinction between learning time and non-learning time, teacher directed learning, clearly defined goals to each learning segment and a concentration on testing as a way of gauging progress. But as time went on many parents questioned these educational practices and changed their views about what education is and how it should be delivered in a home education context.

Most people only experience the school model of education and may never have heard of any other model or may never be in a position where they have to negotiate new meaning with regard to education. The model of education mentioned by the parents in this study as the one they have moved toward, is open ended, flexible and designed by each family to meet their needs. It includes characteristics such as no set time or place for learning, no professionally designed or externally set curriculum, a mixed use of educational styles, learning not being broken into specific subject areas, no clear distinction made between learning time and non-learning time, child-led learning, a concentration on spontaneous and immediate learning, an emphasis on conversation as a means of learning, broad goals to education and little or no use of testing. (Evidence of parents' negotiation of the meaning of the joint enterprise can be gleaned through interviewed parents more detailed descriptions of their negotiations of this practice outlined in Appendix 12).

Home educating parents exemplify the negotiation of the meaning of the home education joint enterprise through the practice of educating their children. Changes in their thoughts and style of education can come about through the active lived experience of home education. But people changed for different reasons (Thomas, 1998). Some responded to the different demands of their different children through being receptive to their children's needs. Some, on seeing their children thrive when setting their own educational agenda, took their cue from this. Others read about education and alternative approaches, including the anecdotal literature about home



education and criticisms of the school model before creating their own approach. However, they all redefined the meaning of education through pursuing the joint enterprise.

### **The Joint Enterprise as Practice/Participation**

In addition to inventing your own practices and constructing new meanings for the concept of education, what makes belonging to a home education community of practice and/or constellation so important to a member's identity, is that the joint enterprise is lived in daily practice. It is through the experience of educating children that home educating parents come to develop theories of education. This activity and theorising about education separates home educating parents from parents who send their children to school. This happens not just in the obvious way that home educating parents have to spend time educating their children whereas parents who send their children to school rely primarily on professionals to do this for them, but also because home educating parents create what education means for themselves on a day-to-day basis and thereby take on the identification of 'home educators'. As well as actively engaging on a daily basis in the education of their children, part of the practice for home educating parents is understanding for themselves, and explaining to others, different educational styles that can evolve from the experience of home education. This will be examined further in the next chapter, when discussing the marginal nature of home education.

Alona's description of a project and how the family approached it, gives a particularly vivid flavour of home education as a lived daily activity:

[My younger son] is medieval mad. He started off with just him and CD ROMs playing *Age of Empires*, working out scenarios, building whole villages and building this wonderful empire where everybody's all busy working, doing things and then he noticed one of the people in it was a legend and cottoned on to that. Then it's, 'Mummy. It's William Wallace. I think he's really brilliant.' He's a good historian. Before we know it, we realised, when we went to Scotland, because we're sort of up there every now and again, the battle he was telling us about, The Battle of Stirling Bridge, from playing the game. So we thought 'Oh, OK then we'll go up to Stirling'. ...We threw the whole thing in together and rang up the National Trust of Scotland and the woman kindly said to me 'do you know about the Wallace monument?' 'Yes, we do because we keep passing it on the way to go to somewhere else.' So she said 'why don't you come down?' So we said OK. We went down to that, took him round the monument, which stands above the river Stirling. The whole thing tied in. We took him to the castle for the day when we went back later on. In the afternoon [we took him] for the concert that was held in the castle grounds and on top of that we took him off to the monument and we were looking at the whole river where it twists and turns as you get to the top. It was just like the whole thing was about William Wallace. That's what we tend to do. If the kids are interested in something we say 'OK we'll do that.' We pull in any resources we can get our hands on. It also means ringing up organisations and getting their information to do with that particular thing they're interested in.

We'll just keep following it through till they don't want to do it anymore (7.2004).

This style of education is not exclusive to home educators. Parents whose children go to school can educate their children in this way when they are with them. However, there are several important differences. Firstly, the full responsibility for their child's education lies entirely with the home educating parents. Secondly, the style of education Alona described above has been devised by the family themselves and discovered through the daily practice of home education. Thirdly, this style of education, which has been positively chosen by the family as the style that suits their needs at that time, can be changed as and when the family decide that some other type of education is more suitable. Fourthly, this is the major educational influence that Alona's children will receive. They do not also go to school where they will have the experience of a different style of education. Fifthly, it is a marginal activity and in apparent opposition to the norm of school. This fifth attribute is central to the next chapter of this study.

This shift away from a school model of education does not mean all home educating parents will move to any particular style of education but it does mean that all home educating parents will have to negotiate the meaning of education for themselves and their family in some way. And it is this active invention of a particular educational style that can make home education so influential affecting parent's identities. New meaning is given to 'education' devised by parents in the daily practice of educating their children. Home



educating parents can now rightly see themselves as educators and incorporate this idea into their identities.

### *Competence and Identity*

In addition to the linking of negotiated meaning and practice, a second feature of identity for Wenger (1998) is the exhibition of 'competence'. He analyses competence by specifying three features of identity within a community of practice as discussed in Chapter Four. These features are 'accountability' (allied to the joint enterprise) involving sharing perspectives, 'mutuality of engagement' (allied to mutual engagement) consisting of engaging in and contributing to the activity, and 'negotiation of repertoire' (allied to shared repertoire) referring to the participation of members in determining the language, stories, jokes and history of the community of practice.

These three concepts included in the notion of competence, accountability, mutuality of engagement and negotiation of repertoire, will be addressed in turn. However, it should be noted that these three are not completely distinct from each other and examples from one aspect of competence could, on occasion, also be used as an example of another aspect. Identification with the home education constellation is a specific case that will be discussed at the end of this section.

## **Accountability**

Wenger (1998) maintains that one of the ways a member of a community of practice shows that they are competent in that community is through interpreting, understanding and seeing the world through the lens of the joint enterprise of that community. 'Accountability' refers to members' use of this internalised joint enterprise not only to guide their actions and to interpret and understand other parts of their world, but also to inform their individual identities. Applying this to the practice under consideration, accountability to the joint enterprise of home education manifests itself through parents using the focus of home education to interpret other areas of their life. In this way their behaviour exhibits their identity with the activity of home education. For example, some of the parents interviewed talked about how their home educating experience had changed their life priorities. Linda said of herself and her husband:

[Home education has] changed our outlook on life, certainly. My husband and I both work part-time and we feel our time together as a family is more important than going out and earning more money. Family at home learning every day [is the most important thing]. So it sort of made our views about [life] more concrete and definite and it made us think positively about what we do as a family (4.2000).

For Linda, home educating has changed the way she relates to other areas of her life, exhibiting accountability to the home education constellation. Being with the family had become more important to her than the advantages of full

time work such as higher income, status and career prospects. She has come to see part of herself as a home educator and is using this identity to re-appraise the rest of her life.

Peter explained how his life had been changed by his home educating experience:

I think also you do things that you wouldn't do. I think [home education] camps open your eyes a bit. You go and you meet a lot of different people who are doing things very differently. I think the home ed[ucation] thing makes you look at the world in a different way. You have a completely different viewpoint (7.2004).

Home education seems to have been such a formative experience for him that he is able to describe being accountable to the home education. His internalisation of the home education joint enterprise and the significance he finds in living as a home educator, his accountability to it, have influenced his views in other areas of his life and he now sees the world through the lens of being a home educator. He identifies with home education to the extent that this perspective plays a part in how he interprets, understands and envisages the whole of his world.

Sue was aware of how her experience of home education had changed her outlook toward other areas in her life and helped her to try new things:



It's given me energy to do other things, like when working full time wasn't working for me and I wanted to work part time. I was the only person out of four hundred in this fibre optics company who was working from her house - so I guess that was a big push for me or a leap and [home education has] allowed me in my own life to say 'I can do it' (7.2000).

Her home education experience gave her the self confidence to negotiate new working conditions and due to this she became the first person at her work place to work from home. She has been affected by being accountable to the home education not only in terms of how she home educates but also in terms of how she approaches other areas of her life.

Another way parents exhibit their accountability to the joint enterprise of the home education is through their changing their understanding of education itself, as was discussed above. Parents commented that they had come to re-evaluate what they come to think of as education from when they started home educating. Jane said:

I was very conformist about things like exams, GCSE's and 'A' levels and university degrees, whereas now I'm very aware that I've changed. It wouldn't bother me if [my children] didn't have any [exams], because I think [home education] is so great that if they didn't have them I would feel that it was because they didn't want them. Whereas maybe

ten years ago I would have thought they didn't have them because they failed (4.2000).

And Jennifer talked about how her views about reading age have changed:

It's quite shocking really to think that I actually used to think that because now you see kids in the group and some are small and they can read and some are fourteen and they can't read. I realise it doesn't matter. Whatever they want to follow that's fine with me because I was never allowed to do that when I was little (7.2004).

Parents also keep revising their ideas about what education means to their family as their children develop. Annie said:

We kind of go along, I try and talk to the kids and find out where they are at the moment, what they want to achieve and stuff and work out between us what's the best way to go about that. But it changes a lot. My twelve year old now works on big projects and asks for help when he needs it. I find [home education] changes constantly. I find you can't really apply one method to all of them at all times (7.2004).

Lisa found the same. She said:

Every year it's something different. I don't have a style. I've literally gone from using [a correspondence course], which is from a hundred-

year-old school that's like very academic. They tell you from nine to nine forty-five do this. I've used [another correspondence course], which is supposed to be like a 'hands on' approach and creative. I've used computers. I pick and choose things. I've literally done something different every year (8.2000).

Lisa and Annie are describing being accountable to the enterprise through developing new ideas about education. They are understanding and interpreting their world through the filter of the joint enterprise, the education of their children.

A third way in which accountability to the home education is displayed is through analysing and explaining the educational style the family have adopted to others. Some parents make their new-found theories of education explicit in order to defend their educational approach. Further, when called on to defend this perspective, the repeated explanation and defence of their educational style develops parents' commitment to and identification with home education. This will be discussed more in the next chapter.

These parents are analysing their practice within both home education and other parts of their lives, as informed by the joint enterprise of the home education community of practice and/or constellation. They are demonstrating their accountability to it by firstly, by internalising their understanding of education to reflect their negotiation of the meaning of education and secondly,



by having to continually explain or defend home education and any difference from the norm in educational style.

### **Mutuality of Engagement**

'Mutuality of engagement' refers to a member of a community developing ways of engaging with others in the community or practice and/or constellation. More than this, members are able to develop who they are, their identity, by this activity. This is a complicated category for this study due to the extension of Wenger's (1998) original ideas about engaging in a community of practice. It is being argued that there are at least three levels of engagement in home education communities of practice: the more structured forms of engagement (the neighbourhood home education group, the timetabled group, the unstructured group and the internet discussion lists), the less structured form of engagement (annual home education events) and the very loosely structured form of engagement (internet sites and newsletters) where there is little or no face-to-face contact. In the case of the neighbourhood home education groups, the timetabled group, the unstructured group and the internet discussion lists, relating to the group is manifested through reified objects such as timetables and delegated roles such as making lunch or monitoring the list, as was shown in Chapter Five. For those parents who only meet sporadically their role in the group would need to be developed over time but this could be hastened through use of the internet, newsletters or meeting other home educators face-to-face. Those parents who almost never meet face-to-face can still develop ways of engaging with each other for example, through the internet or newsletters. All

levels of engagement involve contributing to relations of engagement; the fact that parents in this last situation offered to be a part of this study shows them developing and engaging as home educators. This provides evidence that they are identifying themselves as home educators in the process.

### **Negotiation of Repertoire**

‘Negotiation of repertoire’ refers to the ability of a member of a community of practice to recognise, interpret, develop and contribute to the use of the ‘repertoire’ - the language, stories, history and jokes of the community. For home educating parents this involves using a language with a favoured vocabulary, understanding the particular nuanced use of vocabulary within the community, knowing some of the community’s history, telling the stories, having the experiences of being a home educator and making all that this means your own.

Negotiating the repertoire may be more a matter of implicitly adopting some words and stories for repeated use across the membership rather than changing the meaning of words. An example of this from this study is the use of the term ‘facilitator’ used by several of the parents interviewed in its normal meaning as the appropriate term. Parents, having understood and internalised their roles within the community of practice and/or constellation, used ‘facilitator’ to describe their role in home education. Joan said: “[W]ell I think of myself less as an educator but as a facilitator really. To enable my children to discover who they are rather than me imposing things on them” (4.2004). Linda said: “I felt my role was as a facilitator. I would find out. He would come to me



and say he wanted to do this thing” (4.2004). Peter also described his role as a facilitator in more detail:

...you’re not a teacher. You’re a facilitator. It’s a very different function in ‘HE’. Because your children have to want to acquire that knowledge and have a thirst for knowledge. They have to be going out there looking for it. Our function, as I see it, is just to help them do that. Not to feed them the information. The information’s there for them. You don’t need somebody to do that (7.2004).

The term ‘facilitator’ describes how Peter identifies himself, how he looks at himself and this word is frequently used by others. This term has become part of the shared linguistic repertoire and describes the educator in a style of education which involves helping children learn for themselves rather than directly teaching them.

Another example of negotiation of repertoire is in the use of the word ‘autonomous’. When asked what style of home education she used, Jackie said “autonomous”. When asked what that meant to her she replied: “Just basically going with whatever they want to do. Not trying to push them to do anything” (7.2004). Jill used the same word saying for her it meant “following the children’s interests completely” (7.2004). Jackie and Jill had a similar idea of what this word meant to them, to be self determining about one’s own education, demonstrating that they were able to use the word easily as well as explain its meaning.



An interesting example in this connection is provided by Cathy, who when asked about her educational style, described it first in her own words as “[my children] have always done what they wanted to do” (8.2004). She followed this by saying: “usually they say ‘you’re autonomous’ don’t they? In the EO magazine” (8.2004). Cathy is a parent who, it is being argued here, is not a member of a home education community of practice, but is a member of the home education constellation because she does not engage with other home educators face-to-face. Despite this, she agreed with Jill and Jackie as to the meaning of the word but showed some reluctance to use it. This seems to imply reluctance on Cathy’s part to be associated either with the other people who use this word or with other implicit meanings the word may have. Being able to understand the repertoire and choosing not to use it is evidence of Cathy’s understanding of the repertoire of the home education constellation.

Charlotte, who meets with other home educators only occasionally, also used the word somewhat reluctantly. When asked about her style of education, she replied:

...some people would call it autonomous education. As opposed to giving it a label I’d rather just say ‘we see what the weather’s like’ (8.2004).

Charlotte has, in this quote, described some of her own negotiation of the repertoire. She refers to the fact that, in her opinion, although some home

educators use the word 'autonomous' to describe a style of education, she has actively chosen not to use that word as she feels it is constraining. She, as well as Cathy, understand this word to be part of the repertoire but are reluctant to use it. This reflects a shared understanding of the word and what it means to use it. This is, again, evidence of belonging to the home education constellation, although these two parents are choosing to distance themselves from this aspect of it. This may say something about these parents' position in the community but that is not the point being made here. The point at issue is to provide evidence of a shared repertoire of the home education community of practice and/or constellation.

These last examples of negotiating repertoire could also illustrate the difficulty of separating the concepts of accountability, mutuality of engagement and negotiation of repertoire. Charlotte's remark could be taken as an example of mutual engagement as well as negotiation of repertoire as it shows members of the home education community of practice and/or constellation sharing and devising lived practice. It could also be an example of accountability since it shows a parent interpreting their lived daily practice through the joint enterprise of the home education community of practice and/or constellation. Finding examples of any of three aspects of competence that only illustrate that aspect may be impossible as the three aspects are so closely related.

The three aspects of competence are illustrated by and applicable to the activities in the home education community of practice and/or constellation. Parents show accountability to the joint enterprise of home education by seeing



the world from this perspective, they mutually engage and devise the practices of the community and they negotiate the repertoire as they use it, giving meaning to the language and history of the community. These three factors together show a parent's competence in the home education community of practice and/or constellation.

### **Identity and the Home Education Constellation**

It might be thought that those who do not join a home education community of practice but only engage with other home educators through newsletters and websites, would be unable to identify as home educators in Wenger's (1998) theory. But I would like to show here that this is not the case. There is enough in this theory to allow for parents in this situation to identify with the abstract home education constellation despite not being part of a community of practice.

These parents still know about home education groups and they would be able to join them if they chose to. That is to say, these parents would be recognised as legitimate peripheral participants (Wenger, 1998 Paechter, 2003a) by home education communities of practice if they chose to attend, because they objectively fulfil the criteria necessary to be a home educator such as the withdrawal of their children from school, a 'performative act of legitimation' (Paechter, 2003b). In attending a group, they in turn would be able to recognise other members of a home education community of practice as legitimate members of that community (Wenger, 1998). For these reasons these parents are not as 'alone' as they might at first seem.



In addition, these parents fulfil the criteria for competence in the home education constellation. This competence is gained through negotiating the meaning of education. Developing and living one's own educational style, although lived individually, is one of the practices around which the joint enterprise and negotiation of the enterprise revolves. There are many other people doing the same thing (educating their children) and living similar experiences. The particular way the joint enterprise is approached is specific to each family but the nature of the enterprise, to educate the children using one's own negotiated educational style, is the joint enterprise of a home education constellation. This creates a situation whereby the home educating parent participates in and belongs to the home education constellation. By practicing it daily in their own way, home education can begin to be part of a parent's identity. Even if mutual engagement is weak in these parents' case, they still share the joint enterprise of the home education constellation and are part of the whole, as shown by their recognition by others as home educators, and their recognition of themselves as 'home educators'.

### **Competence**

In addition to looking at the objective behavioural examples above of the three criteria for identification, the transcripts of the interviews were examined for subjective evidence of competence informing the self-conscious identity of home educating parents. Without prompting, interviewees spoke explicitly about what home education means to them and how deeply it had affected them with regard to both their children's education and other parts

of their lives. For example, in explaining the term ‘facilitator’, parents not only described themselves but expressed their identification as facilitators. Peter said: “[t]he other thing is how do you look at yourself?” (7.2004). Peter is describing the process of being self-conscious about his role. Another example is given by Miriam who was aware of home education being the general driving force behind the family’s life:

It’s our way of life. It’s not just a nine to five job or just something that we’re going to do for two years. It’s something we’re going to do for all of them till they’re grown up. It’s a way of life. Our whole life really revolves around it (8.2004).

When asked if home education had changed the way Cathy thought about life in general she replied:

Yes, I think it probably has. I think it has because first of all ... it seems a way of life. But it’s also become a very defining thing about you. What are you? Well my children don’t go to school (8.2004).

Cathy is defining herself as a home educator, while not being a member of a home education community of practice. Sue spoke in a similar manner. She said:

I don't get excited about it anymore. I mean [home education] doesn't excite me anymore. It's just who I am. What we do - It's just my life. It's just a part of my life. It's like breathing or going to work ...(8.2004).

In these cases home educators not only practice accountability, are engaged in some way with other home educators and negotiate the repertoire but are aware that they do it. Furthermore, in the second set of interviews, when parents were asked to describe themselves, all the parents answered that they consciously thought of themselves, at least in part, as home educators. This provides evidence that home education is so formative of parents' identities that parents speak of themselves as 'home educators'. How this conclusion is able to be generalised has to be tempered with the reminder that this outcome may have occurred as a result of the parents being interviewed about home education. This can be further implied from the fact that these parents volunteered to be part of a home education study. The interviewees were a self selecting group and therefore may be more self-reflective about their home educating experiences than other home educators. However, this does not rule out the possibility that other parents also strongly identify with home education.

Parents also mentioned a number of other ways they would describe themselves, such as Jill who said she was a "home educating mother of three children who has a business selling clothes" (7.2004). Cynthia said she was a "housewife, anarchist and home educator, environmentally conscious, anti-consumerist, pro-pedestrian information junkie" (8.2004). While most of the



parents said they would put 'home educator' first, Jennifer said she would probably describe herself as a "potter first" (7.2004) but that it depended on who she was talking to. This all suggests that while home education is important to these parents it is not the only aspect of their lives that informs their identity.

Several parents said that 'home educator' was how they would describe themselves *now*, with the implication that they would not have this identity when their children had grown up and their home educating responsibilities had finished. This implies that parents are aware that their identities will change (U. Beck, 1992).

## *Discussion*

The community of practice framework has provided a useful tool for the analysis of practice and its relationship to identity in the lives of long term home educating parents. The framework is able to provide a mechanism for explaining both how parents learn to practice as a home educator in a home education community of practice and constellation, and how this practice potentially affects parents at the level of identity.

Wenger (1998) gives a structural development of the concept of identity. He analyses the three aspects of subjective competence (accountability, mutuality of engagement and negotiability of repertoire) as mirror images of the three

aspects of a community of practice (joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire). He treats identity as the subjective correlate of the objective practice and defines identity in accordance with that objective practice.

However, this structural alignment delineates the subjective properties associated with identity too narrowly. Individual traits, such as a willingness to depart from the norm, could be a factor in determining identity but are not included. By setting up a strict three-part structure and analysing the second set of definitions purely in terms of the first, Wenger (1998) limits his analysis of identity.

Further, use of this structure does not in itself guarantee that all the possible objective avenues of identity have been analysed. It may, in fact, while making the theory easier to follow, result in important objective features of identity being omitted. For example, life circumstances such as age, finances and isolation might also be relevant to identity. These additional factors need not be a problem for Wenger's (1998) theory but they are not explicitly captured in the structural form he has laid out for theorising identity. His analysis may have to be extended to allow further subjective properties and objective life circumstances to be included as relevant to the understanding and analysis of identity.

A second problematic issue with regard to the community of practice framework concerns the reasons for the strength of identification within the community. Wenger (1998) maintains that one of the ways the strength of the identification of a member varies is with their place in the community.

According to this theory, a member who participates less and is at the periphery of the community will have a weaker identification than a fully participating member (Wenger, 1998).

Further, for Wenger (1998) strength of identification can be evidenced from the amount of accountability to the project. This comes from the extent to which members interpret their lives through the focus of the joint enterprise. This might be shown for example by Sue saying home education is “who we are” (7.2000) and Miriam saying home education “is our life” (8.2004). From these statements it can be assumed that most of their life activities are seen through the lens of home education, that they are fully accountable to the joint enterprise of the home education community of practice and therefore strongly identified with it.

However, there may be something about the community of practice itself that makes members more likely to strongly identify with it. There may be reasons other than position in the community or the amount of accountability for a strong identification with a community of practice, for example, the nature of the joint enterprise itself could elicit greater or lesser strength of identification. Some joint enterprises may require more time, more emotional commitment, be necessarily more central to a member’s life, or any combination of these, than others. For example, working as an environmental activist may require more emotional commitment to the joint enterprise than other jobs in order to continue being motivated, because it can be overwhelming, exhausting and can engender feelings of hopelessness



(Kovan and Dirkx, 2003). The home education joint enterprise and therefore home education communities of practice may be more central to a member's life than other communities of practice they are in, because of the emotional attachment to the joint enterprise and its marginal nature of the community.

With home education, the parental undertaking requires time, effort and commitment, given that it is practiced twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Also, the fact that it concerns one's own children and the children's future, carrying weighty responsibility towards them, means that the activity is highly emotionally charged. Further, being involved in a marginal activity, which may put parents in a somewhat antagonistic relationship towards mainstream educators and parents who use mainstream education, places the practice at the forefront of the parents' minds. It is not surprising, it is being argued here, that an activity that takes up this much time and commitment, involves their children, and places them outside the mainstream could strongly absorb a person at the level of identity.

This may go some way to explaining how parents who are not members of any home education community of practice, but are posited in this study as individual members of the home education constellation, are able to identify with the practice to such an extent. Parents who do not engage with other home educators but only engage through newsletters and websites still exhibit identifying attributes. The fact that home educating is a more involving, emotionally laden and active process must go some way towards explaining the strength of parents' identification.

A third area of concern is that although a person is identified as a member of the community, that member may not describe themselves as such. In fact being able to describe oneself as identified with a particular community of practice is not crucial for Wenger (1998). What we say about ourselves is only part of who we are (Wenger, 1998, p.151). For example, it is possible, in Wenger's (1998) analysis, for someone who has been in a job for many years, who is a central member of the office community of practice (sharing the joint enterprise, mutually engaging and sharing repertoire), at the same time, when asked how they see themselves, to omit reference to their work. Instead they may, when asked, identify with other aspects of their lives despite being a central member of their work place community of practice. It may be that such a person does not like their job and is attempting to distance themselves from the activity. While it is legitimate to use what people do as an indication or clue as to what they may think about themselves, there is no inevitable connection between the two. Whether a member of a community of practice explicitly describes themselves as a member of that community or not is relatively unimportant for Wenger.

It might be surmised that articulating one's identity is difficult as it requires a good deal of self-analysis and self-knowledge. Although articulated identification cannot be made a necessary criterion for being a member of a community of practice, it is an important enough factor to be explicitly acknowledged as important for such an identification and may act as a marker indicating the strength of identification. There could be a positive correlation



between what we say about our identity and the strength of our identifications. That is, we can take articulated self identification as evidence of a strong identification. However, to articulate one's identification is not required in order to be identified as a member of a particular community of practice. Nor can articulation, in itself, be taken to indicate strong identification.

From the interviews, it is argued that home educators not only practice accountability, engagement and negotiation of repertoire but also articulate that they do. Further, during the second set of interviews when parents were asked to describe themselves, they all replied that they thought of themselves, at least in part, as home educators. This provides evidence that home education is so formative of identity that parents are conscious of themselves as 'home educators' and explicitly describe themselves as such.

Wenger (1998) does not hold that identification with a community has to be articulated. The fact that the objective practice does not guarantee an articulate subjective identification with the community lends support to the contention that home education is a community of practice and/or constellation which encourages strong identification. It is an emotionally involving activity for parents both because it revolves around their children and because it relates to their place in wider society. Home educating parents not only fulfil the objective criteria for being a member of a community of practice and/or constellation but are also likely to articulate that the daily objective practice of home educating their children, translates for them into a strong subjective identification with the practice. By reporting what home



education means to them through an explicit description of themselves as home educators they are lending weight to the suggestion that parents as members of the home educating community of practice and/or constellation are strongly identified with it and as home educators.

## *Summary*

In the community of practice framework, practice and identity are interconnected. Identity formation involves learning through practice and is central to the process of being a member of a community of practice and/or home education constellation. The daily lived practice in the home education community of practice and/or constellation can lead parents to strongly identify as home educators.

Identity is formed through negotiation of meaning, making the joint enterprise your own. Evidence for the identification of these home educating parents comes from their discussions about their relationship to education in such areas as learner-led learning, no set time or place for learning, creating a curriculum or choosing a professionally developed one or a mixture of educational styles, and an emphasis on conversational learning. Whatever changes in their relationship to education have been made, the important aspect is that parents change the practice themselves. In doing so they have negotiated the meaning of these practices and what education means for them. The linking of meaning, negotiating the enterprise and working out its meaning

for you, and action, the daily lived practice of home education, is powerful and engages the identity of the parent.

Competence, a term used by Wenger (1998) to denote subjectively identifying as a member of a community of practice and/or constellation, translates into three aspects, accountability, mutuality of engagement and negotiability of repertoire which each in turn reflect the earlier aspects of participation in a community, joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire.

‘Accountability’ refers to a member internalising the joint enterprise such that it guides the member’s actions and informs their individual identity. It is argued here that some of the parents interviewed exhibit accountability to the home education community of practice and/or constellation through using the focus of home education to interpret other areas of their lives such as changing their understanding of what education means for them and becoming unintended educationalists.

‘Mutuality of engagement’ refers to developing ways of engaging with others in the community of practice. It has been proposed in this study that there are different levels of engagement in the home education community of practice. This phenomenon is evidence of parents’ contributions to the home education community of practice mutuality of engagement, as they work out for themselves how to engage with the community. Even some of those who do not mutually engage but only read the newsletters or visit websites are engaged in the practice of home education. They commit to it and identify as home educators.



'Negotiation of repertoire' refers to recognising, interpreting, developing, and contributing to the stories, jokes and history of the community. This can take the form of adopting words such as 'autonomous' and the use of the word 'facilitator'. It is difficult to separate these three aspects of competence in practice as they are so closely allied. Despite not being asked specifically about it, some parents spoke of how deeply home education had affected their lives. All those who were asked about their identification with home education defined themselves, at least in part, as a 'home educator'

There are certain problems with Wenger's (1998) structural development of identity. The three aspects of competence are treated as exact correlates of the three definitional aspects of a community of practice. This limits the aspects of identity to these three factors and reduces the analysis of these factors to suit Wenger's (1998) over all structure. Secondly, the reason for strength of identification in a community of practice for Wenger (1998) lies in a member's position in that community as well as the amount of accountability they have toward it. It is being suggested here that the nature of the joint enterprise might also be a factor in determining the strength of identification. In home education the joint enterprise requires commitment in terms of time and effort as well as engendering emotions. It is being suggested that it is the nature of home education that makes identification possible even when a parent is only a member of the home education constellation. It is also a marginal activity which means parents will have to explain and defend the activity. These factors serve to bring about a different relationship between the joint enterprise and

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the member of community that may mean the member becomes more identified with a community with this type of joint enterprise.

Further, articulating identity can be assumed to be difficult and doing it noteworthy. Does being conscious of one's identity provide evidence of a stronger identification with the community than those who are not conscious of their identification? This question is beyond the scope of this study but it is surmised that the conscious and articulate nature of the identification in the parents interviewed, as well as the content of their interviews, suggests a strong identification with the home education community of practice and/or constellation and a strong identification as home educators.

It is suggested here that it is necessary to extend Wenger's (1998) framework to include some analysis of possible gradation of strength of identification to account for the articulated nature of home educating parents' identification. To answer the question of why this identification should be so strong in a home education community of practice and/or constellation, it is suggested that the responsibility of the joint enterprise of educating their own children, as evidenced through daily lived practice and the articulation of identity, coupled with the marginal nature of home education, makes this activity highly emotionally charged. Such emotionally involved practices are likely to lead to strong identification. It is therefore not surprising that these emotionally involving relations lead to parents strongly identifying with the home education communities of practice and/or constellation and as educators.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Marginality and Identity**

In the previous chapters the factors influencing home educating parents' identities were proposed to be the responsibility for their children's education and future, becoming an educator, the actual day-to-day activity of home education and being a member of a home education community of practice and/or constellation. This chapter focuses on how interaction with other communities of practice and the wider public, including those representing legal and educational bodies, can also affect and change the identity of home educating parents. In particular, it will be argued that being marginalised and possibly considered deviant, contributes considerably to changes in identity, and more often than not, in a positive direction.

#### *Being marginal and marginalised*

Home education is a marginal activity because most families in western societies send their children to school. The external pressure of being outside the mainstream, being marginal, may profoundly affect parents. They can find themselves and their families relatively isolated from mainstream society and can potentially open themselves to being labelled deviant, extreme or suspect, all with negative connotations (Merriam, Courtenay and Baumgartner, 2003). Being marginal is not part of the definition of home education. It is through being in a minority that challenges widely accepted societal expectations that marginality follows. An educational system where



most children were home educated might be imagined (Adcock, 1994; Thomas and Lowe, 2002) but this is not the case in modern western societies.

The implications of being marginal for the individual family can be seen when friends, relations and the wider community show scepticism about the choice to home educate or, even worse, are against it. Some parents I interviewed felt their marginal position opened them to attacks from the outside world and they therefore considered it to be a threatening place to be. Cynthia, Finolla and Beth expressed different aspects of the reality of being marginal in society. It can mean being frightened to go out, being asked to justify your decision and having to defend yourself against attacks such as that you have deserted mainstream education. Cynthia said:

Am I going to get stopped in a shop? Am I going to be stared at because my child isn't in school? If I open my mouth about home education are people going to be aggressive about it (8.2004)?

Cynthia continued that being a home educator made her feel vulnerable and harassed:

It's the outside attack on home education and the having to constantly defend it. .... I really would like to live without that aspect of it really. And just be left to get on with it. It's just the time it takes. Because you're going against the social norms it is difficult (8.2004).



Other parents mentioned marginality as a strain. Finolla expressed some regret that she was not able to relax and just go along with the status quo as it would make her life easier:

[I]t's like when I don't give them vaccinations and part of me wishes that I totally trusted it all and just vaccinated them. Then you wouldn't even think about it. And it's like, anything that you have a bit of a moral stance over, sometimes it would be really nice to just not have one and not think and actually have your sole focus being other things (8.2004).

One more unusual criticism levelled at home educating parents (Apple, 2005) was addressed by Beth. She said her cousin had argued with her that home educated families are not contributing to the mainstream education system and was thereby failing in civic duties. Beth replied:

I don't know that I have answers for all of society, but I do know that I can answer for [my children's] best [interests], for my children's well-being. And that's all that I could deal with at that point. And I didn't feel I needed to sacrifice all to it. I wasn't convinced that society's good was really being met by school, or just because somebody else couldn't home school, [this] was not a reason for me not to, if I wanted to (9.1999).

Home education has been associated with a more negative aspect of marginalisation, deviance. For example, in a recent tragic case of a 15 year old girl being killed in Goa, an anonymous BBC article linked home education with children who are not being properly cared for and parents who are irresponsible and negligent (BBC, 2008). 'Deviance' is notoriously difficult to define; one approach has been to define it as normative violation (Best, 2006). Whatever the definition, deviance carries with it negative connotations of uncivilised behaviour and of people being out of control. Further, deviance can be classified as 'illegal behaviours' as has been done by the state in the UK (Watts, 2000, cited in Grosvenor and Watts, 2002). While home educating parents would obviously acknowledge that they are in a minority and possibly accept that they are marginal, few would be likely to think of themselves as deviant. This is probably because marginality implies just being in a minority while deviance implies more than this, social pathology, an abandonment of mainstream social mores and unrestrained and unchecked behaviour. Wendy talked of deviance in terms of illegality that she was not prepared to undertake. She said she didn't have the nerve to home educate when it seemed she might have to break the law:

You did it by being illegal. There were very few legal methods of home schooling at the time. How long ago? 18 years ago, I guess. There were not many states where it was legal but gosh! All the paper work plus you had to do school at home. You had to get special permission from the school. There was a lot of turning in reports and very close monitoring and very little flexibility and basically you did whatever the



school system told you to at home and it was certainly frowned on at the time. People just couldn't believe you would do that. Of course there was 'what about socialisation?' and all these things ... 'you're going to be ruining your children for life if you keep them home'.

...When my oldest one actually got to school age I didn't really have the guts to buck the system. ... bucking the system and dealing with the legalities and bucking the family... I couldn't quite make that jump. I didn't want to deal with the entire hassle. That's part of it too. Because there were, at the time, there were horrendous legal things (8.2000).

The legal situation changed and then Wendy felt able to home educate even though home educating still meant that Wendy became marginal and she may have had to 'buck her family'. It is also evident that she does not consider herself in any way deviant in the manner described above. However, as she points out, others might consider her to be at least bordering on deviant.

### **Coming to terms with Marginality**

There is very little outside help available to cope with disapproval and being marginalised. In the face of this the home education community of practice can become a refuge from the wider world. When engaging in the home education community of practice members can relax and discuss similar problems they face due to the marginal nature of home education. In this sense, the community of practice can give some respite to members. It can also become a focal point where parents can join together to discuss ways to



defend the practice. In this way, marginality can aid the mechanism of learning and identity formation in a community of practice and/or constellation. In relying on it for protection and as a means of defence, a member's identity can become more embedded in the community of practice and/or constellation.

Being part of a group that is considered marginal may impinge on other areas of a member's life, affecting their relationships with other communities of practice of which they are a part (Merriam et al, 2003). Home educating families are often involved in other communities of practice outside home education, such as church, scouts, youth clubs, orchestras, music groups, sports teams and so on (Dobson, 2000; Barfield, 2002). In trying to reconcile the various communities of practice with the home education community, parents need to think about the underlying attitudes of the many communities of practice of which they are a part. There may be different assumptions about how home educators live their lives depending on the community in question. Members of other communities of practice may brand home educators negatively, seeing them as deviant, may quiz them, shun them or be fascinated by them, seeing them as radical. Whatever the reaction, positive or negative, the home educator is likely to be treated differently in some respect, and being different can be a problem for some parents. Being different can lead to feelings of distrust of those who are not members of the home education community of practice and/or constellation. This may result in home educating parents feeling the need to keep the fact

that they home educate a secret from members of other communities of practice in which they are involved.

Anecdotally, in recent years, there seems to be less of a need to defend home education. It may be that a more positive attitude in parents has come about over time as home educating parents become more confident in their ability to home educate. Another factor might be the increasing acceptance in society, in the last twenty years or so, of home education as a valid and acceptable alternative. For example, Rosheen talked about meeting a new person who was positive about home education after Rosheen described it to them:

[S]he thought it was great. She thought it was brilliant to give children a chance to be their own masters and make their own minds up, and how it's all part of the same thing of making a better world, if we can bring up these children to make their own minds up. ...So talking to her and her being interested as well, it was great. (7.1999).

This acceptance may be because of greater exposure to home education through the media and the growing numbers of home educators mean a greater likelihood of coming across a home educating family or at least hearing about one. As home education becomes more acceptable, people in the mainstream may see it in a more positive light even if they would not do it themselves. Confirmation from such people may help parents become more positive about what they are doing. The home education communities of



practice would play less of a refuge role and more of a social and informative role for those who are comfortable with their choice.

In order to address the issue of how being marginal affects home educating parents in terms of identity and marginalisation, it may be illuminating to compare another marginal (and often thought of as deviant) group, with the home educating situation, that is lesbian mothers. Both areas, lesbianism and home education, centre on the home and intimately involve women who can suffer discrimination. Where lesbian families provide an alternative view of relationships including challenges to gender classifications, home educating families provide an alternative to mainstream education and challenge mainstream views in that way. Constantly facing and challenging discrimination makes members of these marginal groups more likely to incorporate the group into their identities. To what extent mainstream acceptance of lesbian families might play a part in identity formation is difficult to say though it appears likely that it does have an impact, as suggested by Saffron (1998) in her study of lesbian mothers. As the two groups, lesbian mothers and home educating parents, do share communalities with regard to marginalisation, the fact that lesbian mothers appear more likely to identify as such can be seen as some evidence that home educating parents would also be more likely to identify as 'home educators'.



## **Marginal Practice and Politicisation**

There is evidence that one consequence of home education may be the politicisation of parents along with a change in their identity and a raise in confidence. Because there is so little research on home education, parallel cases of identity change need to be examined. As with the situation of lesbian mothers used earlier, despite differences in context, there is another group with which an analogy can be made, between the situation of home educating parents and parents of children with special needs. Both have to individually create ways of conducting their lives to fulfil their particular requirements and both have to deal with the consequences of not being seen as 'normal'. Although parents of children with special needs are not responsible for day-to-day education they do assume responsibility for the health and future of their children, become adept at medical care and look to join communities of practice and/or constellations of people placed similarly for support. They also meet with negative societal attitudes and stereotyping which marginalises the disabled and their families [Bratlinger, 2006].

Similarly, research into the role of women's organisations created during the UK miners' strike of 1984-5 can throw light on the situation of home educating parents. These were grass roots group of women who suffered marginalisation from society at large through being connected to the strike and suffering the consequences of the strike without being directly involved. Research (Ali, 1986; Callaway, 1986) from the role of the miners' wives suggests it is possible to hypothesise that the miners' wives' politicisation is an intensified version of what happens in other grass roots interest groups

such as home education. Similarly as was seen by studies of families fighting for help for their children with special educational needs, it is possible to hypothesise about the development and maturing of political ideas and about how groups fighting for the same goal can share experiences and support each other by forming political communities of practice.

There are several features of this politicisation that home educators have in common with these groups. An attempt will be made here to structure what is actually a haphazard journey for most parents. The sequence described will necessarily reflect this with the categories listed as separate elements actually overlapping and intertwining in practice.

Firstly, in the beginning the miners' wives organised as necessary at a local level for their own communities. After some time these local support groups joined together to form national networks and these in turn strengthened and gave structure to the local groups (Ali, 1986). Similarly, the marginal nature of parents of children with special needs also provides an impetus for them to seek communities of practice through which to gain information and support. Simmons and Nind (2003) have studied the empowerment of group phenomena in the case of parents of children with special needs. It seems that despite the law being sympathetic to their cause, parents still have to discover what their legal position is and fight to get the law put into action (see also Simmons, 1992). Simmons and Nind (2003) discuss the fact that parents who have to 'fight' for services for their children learn from other direct action groups either by imitation or by joining forces. They point out



that when parents join together they learn how to make a 'fight' work, that this information is empowering and that these groups are supportive.

These points could also be made about home educating parents and their communities of practice and constellation. While the daily practice of home educating does not require continual confrontation with the legal and state educational systems, it nevertheless has similar issues to parents of special needs children and the miners' wives. Home educating parents also have to discover the true legal position about home education from sources such as the neighbourhood home education communities of practice or the internet and despite the fact that home education is legal, some home educating parents have to fight local authorities for the right to home educate (see Alpress and Turnbull, 2000). Many LAs fail to support home education by, for example, disseminating misinformation (LA anonymous letter, 2002). Home educating parents learn how to 'fight' for their right to home educate either by imitation or by joining forces with each other.

The many neighbourhood home education support groups created and maintained by home educating parents form networks which in turn provide support and legitimacy for themselves as well as for other neighbourhood home education groups and national home education organisations.

Further, as with the miners' wives, in times of stress the different local communities of practice will join together, regionally or nationally, to support each other and defend their practices.



While not all home educating parents join these communities of practice, their political importance in supporting those who do use them should not be underestimated. The neighbourhood home education groups can provide both educational support and practical help, being a place where newcomers can 'learn' to be home educators and where all home educators, in finding sympathetic friends, can begin to recognise the political importance of belonging to a group and being organised. Peter expressed how frightened he and his partner felt when they began to home educate. He felt the support he received was so important that he wanted to repay the home education community in the future in some way. He said:

When we started it's that fear factor. It's quite a thing and you feel like you're on your own and anybody you can talk to or any feedback you get is really valuable at that time. So it's good if you can do that for other people ... if you can help them to feel a bit more relaxed and confident. It isn't the big deal you think it is. It's like, it is possible (7.2004).

Even the parents in this study who do not attend a neighbourhood home education group, it has been argued, are part of a wider home education constellation. Newsletters, internet discussion lists and websites are part of the configuration as are national organizations such as EO and HEAS and national camps such as Hes Fes (all formed and maintained by home educating parents). Through these self-help organisations home educating parents can find the support they need and help to support others, learning

the value of being organised together. And through these activities a political network is established which facilitates and supports the home educating population.

A second area of similarity between the situation of other marginalised groups and home educating parents is that organising and extending their concerns to other areas of life leads to permanent politicisation as Ali (1986) found in relation to miners' wives. The end of the strike did not mean the end of the wives' political action. The wives saw new links between their local struggles and national ones as well as links between issues from the strike and wider issues such as nuclear power or privatisation of businesses. Consequently, some miners' wives went on to join other struggles after the strike. The miners' struggle occasioned a permanent change in the women (Kendall and Norden, 1985). They engaged in the "subtle dynamics of informal decision making" (Callaway, 1986, p.222), and their being actively and effectively involved in a movement, their making a difference, also added to their continued confidence and to their feeling that they could go on to make a difference in other areas (G. Goodman, 1985; Callaway, 1986).

One example of this from among the home educating parents in this study was from Alona, who talked about fighting actively for human and children's rights when her home education responsibilities are over. She felt too busy and worried that dealings with the authorities might negatively affect her and her children to take this on while home educating. Alona described her dilemma:

It's difficult when your children are young ... but once the boys are close to getting out of the system, the whole compulsory learning age thing, then I've got the opportunity to do a lot more... I want to do more.... (7.2004).

A third factor mentioned by Ali (1986) is the maturation of political ideas. In relation to the miners' wives, Ali (1986) explains:

The vague and naïve political notions they expressed at the start of the strike had developed into advanced and sophisticated ideas they were able to articulate with confidence and commitment (p.100).

Analogously, some parents in this study also achieved some political maturation of their ideas and became articulate about them. One example comes from Cynthia who has begun to think more subtly about how people are treated in the broader world context.

... [Home education] made me think more about people and conflicts on a global level. And how we're dehumanising people and how we treat other people and how other people perceive each other. That kind of thing. I think it's made me more aware of causes. And the right to individual freedom. I mean, I may not agree with how people school their children, how people live their lives, but it doesn't mean to say that I want them to change...It's made me more conscious in that kind



of way. People having a right to live how they have decided without interference from other people, even though I may not agree with them (8.2004).

Fourthly, Ali (1986) notes that the miners' wives moved out of their normal roles, such as housekeepers, to political roles, such as manning the picket lines. Similarly, home educating parents move out of their 'normal' role as 'parent' to also include the new role of 'educator'. This can entail deliberation about what education is as was discussed in Chapter Seven. Parents talked about their move from one model of education to another. Before home educating most parents held a model of education very similar to the one used in schools around the country. This includes an expert teaching many young people of similar age in a specific place or educational institution, with specific subject areas taught in timetabled slots. Hannah said:

[B]eing a teacher I was very school based. Having taken them out of school, initially we drew up a timetable for mornings. Mornings were for formal work.... We did Maths or English each morning and then some sort of topic based work (7.1999).

Miriam also felt she had to follow the model described by Hannah above when she began home educating, in order to please the government inspectors: "When I first started doing it, because I had school inspectors breathing down my neck, ... I thought I had to do it the way schools do it, I was very structured" (8.2004).

Finolla, Maria, Joan, Jackie and Jennifer were able to remember themselves as newcomers to home education and reported that they all thought home education would be like school. For example, Finolla said:

I thought we'd probably be doing far more, more conventional subjects than we actually do. I think it is quite difficult initially to visualise. You think you're going to be whizzing through all the maths and the English and that type of thing in quite a conventional way (7.2004).

However, with the experience of education at home, parents became more independent in their views of what constituted education. Joan mentioned the fact that she felt she had changed after some time to a different style of education in response to observing how her children learn:

... I've loosened up a hell of a lot in ten years because I've realised it's not necessary to have that structure. As I've learnt a bit more about how children learn and develop, I've realised it isn't necessary. I think I probably gave them quite a hard time in the early days. Things are much more lax now because I've realised that isn't necessary (4.2004).

Jennifer came to realise that children learn at different rates through her experience with her child at home:

I realise this now but it took me a long time to realise that. It's changed my whole view on children. Absolutely....when I took [my daughter] out of school I really did think that children were, like I say, learnt at all the same pace and were pretty much all the same. I didn't have any conception that they could learn as individuals (7.2004).

Learning to be an educator and what that means, as described above, are examples of the changing roles of home educating parents. Although not wholly analogous, the miners' wives had to take on new roles as did the home educating parents. Having to think about education and what it means for them and their children in a way that is constant, embedded in their active lives and intimately relevant for their own and their children's futures, often in a way that is very different from learning in school, helps to change their identity with regard to their educational philosophy.

Fifthly, miners' wives, parents of children with special needs and home educating parents all found themselves beginning to think critically about political issues. Having to deal with the various bureaucracies relating to their newfound situations, they came to question the normative ideology that the authorities 'know best' and could always be relied upon to put just laws into practice (McDonald et al, 1999). In keeping with this, Jennifer said her experience of home education had made her

...much more anti-establishment now... Yes. It's really changed my view of life in so many different ways. I don't know where to start. The



routine that everybody's supposed to have, I mean I get up and I don't get dressed 'til half past nine. And that would be considered to be, you know, that's not what you do. You have to get up, get dressed at seven and be out the door by half past eight. And I just don't do that (7.2004).

Sarah found the home education experience made her critically question wider issues. She extended her thinking from home education into critical considerations of society as a whole, a process of political maturation:

It's made me question a lot about what's happens, what we're doing, when you experience a much better path, you see the possibilities. You can see the tension all around you, can't you? We need to stop and think about this and decide what we want...We've got to look at things in a broader sense, we could do things very differently... I believe society is seriously out of sorts. ... A surprisingly large number of people don't even know how to function to their true potential. But then we're not giving people that sort of experience really are we? And you can't fill in by having extra lessons in citizenship or whatever; you can't make it up in that way, can you? Children need the life experience not a lesson as such (4.2000).

In summary, the results of this study support the idea that the experience of home education politicises parents. Evidence supporting a tendency to politicisation and arguments about the mechanisms by which it occurs come

from the literature about other marginal groups such as miners' wives during the miners' strike of 1984-5, lesbian mothers and families with children with special needs. Many similarities were identified: dealing with the establishment; creating and managing their own organisations, locally and nationally, and thereby gaining insights and support; enabling permanent politicisation to develop; developing new skills and roles and making new links; maturing of political ideas; coming to question normative ideologies by thinking critically about society. These characteristics taken together go a long way towards explaining the process of the politicisation of home educating parents. For some parents, through their home educating experiences, they eventually become more self assured, independent, more politically aware. These findings help to better understand not just the position of home educating parents but also how adults become politicised and change their relationship to society.

### **Marginalisation and Confidence**

Although most home educating parents may feel marginalised when they embark on home education, most of those in this study have learned to deal with it. In fact, over the long term, home educating parents usually notice a gain in confidence. This confidence shows itself not only in relation to home education when seeing their children thrive educationally and socially but also in some cases, in relation to the wider world through becoming more self assured and sometimes radicalised in their views and values.

Confidence can become so strong that it leads to the belief that mainstream education and social values generally might be no more than “a big con”. As Maggie put it:

Because I think once you see through one of the biggest myths there is you suddenly wonder what else is real. This idea that children have to go to school and you couldn't possibly be competent to educate them - And also I think [about] the battles you have to do to home educate. And that you're forced to argue your corner so much. I think also, as you see your children develop, you see for yourself what rubbish there is in the education system and what a waste of time it is and you start thinking about it more politically, about what purpose it serves and it's got very little to do with children or with education really. Those sorts of things that toughen you up somehow, make you think well, I questioned this and I'll question everything else as well while I'm at it. It's a big con really isn't it? Because we all grow up grow up thinking, school, education, then you think hang on (7.2004).

For some of the parents interviewed, this change in confidence extended beyond educational matters to questioning other areas of life where professionals are usually considered to be experts, such as health.

Confidence gained with regards to home education spread to other areas of Maggie's life and led her to become generally less conformist and more radical:



I don't give a monkey's any more about what people think of me. I don't care about expressing my opinions. Its surprises me sometimes that people think I'm radical and that's often when I'm being at my most careful. I'm far more mouthy than I was and far less willing to settle long arguments and rubbish (7.2004).

Miriam was more explicit about how her experience of being different and successful in home education had generalised to other areas:

I'm much more radical now. I don't inoculate my children anymore. I've started thinking about lots of different things I took for granted. I [used to] just do what the authorities tell me to do. But now I've started to think completely differently and look into things (8.2004).

Ruth talked in a similar vein. She felt that through home education she did not "have to be constrained by society" (8.2004). She maintained that 'being different' was an important issue to deal with:

In the school system you just accept that people go to school but then you think maybe there's an alternative? [Maybe] there's an alternative to the standard, accepted, conventional way of doing things, which can be really really rewarding if you pursue it? That's the main thing. You don't have to follow the crowd and do everything that everybody else does (4.2004).

Parents expressed concerns about the wider world and felt that they had undergone experiences through home education that translated into other areas of their lives. This manifested itself in parents in different ways. Some parents wanted to help others find out about home education, as exemplified by Peter's comments. Other parents like Maggie, Miriam, Ruth, Sarah and Jennifer used their home education experiences to re-think their views on society at large and as a result of becoming more politically aware.

Some parents saw this gain in confidence also spreading to their children as Alona explained:

If you home educate them [the children are] going to develop in their own way anyway but they're going to be doing it for themselves and they're not going to be trying to do it for somebody else or to please anybody else (7.2004).

The experience of prejudice and oppression opens the possibility of home educated children being more resistant to conformity and learning greater acceptance of different choices in their own adult life. Of course, it is also possible that some children might prefer conformity for themselves after experiencing a non-standard upbringing.

Home education is an emotive situation which can make parents more open to new possibilities, while at the same time making them vulnerable to failure. Their identities as 'good' parents are, to some extent, thrown into



confusion and put into doubt, particularly in the initial stages of home education. It is proposed that this insecure transition period will tend to make parents more open to change in the search for security and confidence about this choice. Further, through home education's marginal place in society parents tend to take on the values and attitudes of that community of practice or constellation more quickly and completely than other communities of practice or constellations which are more mainstream. It is being suggested that successfully overcoming obstacles with others in a marginal community of practice or constellation increases the likelihood of parents becoming strongly identified with that community of practice and that principle applies to home education.

### *Summary*

A change of identity is a highly charged process. There are several factors in home education that, as it has been argued, make it highly likely to affect parents at the level of identity. Firstly, on a subjective level, home education requires a substantial focus of attention on one's children as their future is at stake. Children are considered the future (Lois, 2005) and acting in the best interests of a child "is among the most emotionally charged and culturally universal explanations [parents] can give for their actions" (Stevens, 2001, p93). This is true for most modern parents whose children and their development are seen as indicators of the health of the family and society as a whole. When it comes to their children and their children's



future, parents make a great emotional investment making it more likely that parents will make the choice will be highly emotionally charged and likely to affect them at the level of identity.

The second factor is that the decision to home educate and the experience of it can have a strong emotional impact on parents at the level of identity because they personally take on the huge responsibility for their children's education, usually thought to be the domain of experts. This responsibility far outweighs parents who send their children to school and opens the way for a change at the level of identity.

Thirdly, having rejected a respected social institution, parents become marginal in society. Having to constantly explain and defend one self, is emotionally taxing. There is also an implied criticism of other parents' decision to send their children to school which increases the opprobrium faced and the energy needed to face this. This encourages identification with the home education community of practice and/or constellation (which begins to feel like a place of refuge) and the internalisation of its features as part of one's identity.

Lastly, it has been argued that due to the experience of being marginalised, many parents show growing confidence in themselves as people who can organise, have learnt new skills, have increased their political awareness and have played a creative role in the world. It is clear that home education is a formative and powerful experience for many parents, often radicalising them

and increasing their political awareness. Criticism and social marginality function as an encouragement to engage with others in a joint enterprise and shape parents' identities as home educators.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Concluding Discussion**

The main purpose of this chapter is to return to the original research questions and to see how far they have been answered in the course of this study. Before proceeding to these questions, however, given that I am also a home educating parent, I will return to methodological issues encountered in this research. This has been acknowledged as having disadvantages and advantages (van Heugten, 2004; Coghlan and Hollian, 2007). The problems encountered with the interviews were spelled out in some depth and included: being known to the interviewee, possible hostility or deference to the researcher by the interviewee because of being well known in the home educating world and the interviewee being less forthcoming than they might have been. The advantages for an insider include better access to the study group, higher participation rates and more open and in depth replies due to the interviewees feeling relaxed and understood in a sympathetic atmosphere. How far such considerations, common in a great deal of social research, affected the interviews is hard to say.

There could also be a problem of objectivity for insider researchers themselves. For example while all researchers are affected by pressures which can slant their conclusions, insider researchers may be so at a very fundamental level. However, the fact that the problem of objectivity is more pronounced in the case of the insider researcher also means that the researcher and the interviewee are both more likely to be aware of it and



attempt to mitigate it by keeping an open mind and not imposing any agenda. It has to be acknowledged that a personal perspective will have some bearing on any work, including this one, and that this is something that always has to be taken into account (Sikes, 1997).

The interviews in this study were undertaken in the UK and the US. It was found that despite the national and cultural differences between these two countries there were no appreciable differences in the attitudes exhibited about home education. Thomas (1998) similarly found little to differentiate relatively large numbers of Australian and British home educators. A glance at home education magazines and newsletters in countries where home education is common also reveals little in the way of difference. At a more anecdotal level my own experience in the US and Europe bears this out. Informally, it seems that having responsibility for your children's education, having to develop some theory of learning, being outside the mainstream, dealing with the establishment and having to defend one's choice to home educate is characteristic of home education in whatever country it is attempted. However, this needs to be confirmed by further research.

It is now possible to return to the original research questions and look at each in turn. The first sub-question was: 'what is the process by which home educating parents develop their practices?' This question arose in order to understand the changing practice which parents undertake as they become home educators. After deliberation Community of Practice theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) was chosen as the framework for this study

because it provides a theoretically rich setting in which to conceptualise the process of home educating parents developing their practice.

Applying this theory, parents are understood to be connected to a home education community of practice through the common joint enterprise of educating their children, mutually engaging and developing a shared repertoire. The practice of home education takes place through daily educational activity both individually and collectively. Three different types of neighbourhood group that fulfil the requirement of mutual engagement in a paradigmatic community of practice were identified: the co-op, a neighbourhood group where parents teach their children and socialise together in a structured school like manner; the timetabled group where regular classes are scheduled and members can choose which to attend; and the unstructured neighbourhood group where families meet together primarily for social reasons although activities considered educational can occur spontaneously or with little forward planning. Pursuing a joint enterprise results in a shared repertoire of linguistic and physical symbols such as shared jokes about home education problems and labels such as the description 'schooly'.

Wenger's (1998) concept of mutual engagement required further refinement when the Community of Practice theory was applied to the practice of home education. Here mutual engagement takes place on at least three levels and all three levels entail membership of families in communities of practice. The three levels are firstly, the neighbourhood level, described above, which more



obviously satisfies Wenger's criteria for being a community of practice.

Secondly, there is the 'virtual' level, where parents do not engage face-to-face with others but where they talk with others on the internet. Despite no direct engagement, internet chat lists also fulfil Wenger's (1998) criteria for being a community of practice because as well as having a joint enterprise and sharing a repertoire, they provide a site for conversation and reciprocally engage (Johnson, 2001). Thirdly, there is the sporadic level where, despite the fact that mutual engagement takes place only occasionally, for example, at annual home education conferences and camps, the three criteria for being a community of practice are still met.

There is a further category of home educators who engage with other home educators only through reading newsletters and by visiting websites. This is a one-way, not a mutual, engagement. As they do not mutually engage with other home educators by meeting face-to-face or by exchanging views on chat lists they cannot be said to meet Wenger's criteria for being members of a community of practice. Instead the framework would count them as belonging to the home education constellation (Wenger, 1998). The home education constellation is an abstract entity which encompasses all the groups and some individuals who practice home education. These parents count as members of the home education constellation because as well as their one-way engagement they continually and actively engage in the practice of home education and because they could at any time visit a home education community where mutual recognition and acceptance as fellow home educators would take place (Paechter, 2003a).



This study has extended Wenger's framework to cope with different levels of engagement of home educators: from the co-op and neighbourhood home education group to those who only meet occasionally at annual national camps through those who do not mutually engage with other home educators. It is the practice of home education, a constant lived activity developed in a community of practice and/or constellation which is the process that quintessentially develops home educators. The similarity of the experiences of all home educators during the process, such as shared experience of taking on the responsibility for the children's education, choosing educational styles and facing the pressures of being marginal, binds them together as members of the home education constellation and is the basis for their mutual recognition.

The second research question, what is the nature of home education that makes it so engaging for parents, can also be elucidated by the Community of Practice framework. An important part of the Community of Practice framework for this study has been the linking of practice in a social setting with changes in identity. Through participation in communities of practice and/or the constellation, members negotiate meaning and thereby make the activity their own and part of their identity. This is shown through their competence in that community: they know what to do, how to act and can recognise other members, would be recognised as members and engage with them. For Wenger (1998) competence breaks down into three concepts that mirror the three participatory concepts: joint enterprise translates into

accountability, mutual engagement into mutuality of engagement and shared repertoire into negotiability of repertoire. Briefly, accountability refers to internalising the meaning of the enterprise, mutuality of engagement refers to developing the ways of engaging to further the joint enterprise and negotiability of repertoire refers to continually creating, using and understanding the communal memories, stories, and jokes. These three features of identity are intertwined with the three aspects of participation and are all constantly evolving. While some criticisms were made about the artificial isomorphism of the theoretical structures of participation and identity, the analysis of the practices leading to changes in identity was both relevant to and explanatory of the shifts in identity of home educating parents.

Certain aspects of home education are very significant in the formation of parents' identities. A key feature, revealed in this study, which informs identity is creatively thinking about education and implementing new practices for and to one's children, while learning to change and adapt oneself. Parents not only have to devise an educational programme but they also have to reorganise the family's lives to incorporate new schedules. They analyse and re-analyse the position of the family and children, moderate their family's behaviour to take into account continual shifts and development and continually check that they are making the right decision. Parents face daily challenges for which there are no rules, guidelines or blueprints from mainstream society. Given all this, it is not surprising if parents' lives, as well as their children's lives, are affected to the point where



they internalise their experiences and make being a home educator part of their identity.

It is the nature of the home education experience itself which makes it so engaging for parents that they learn to identify as educators. They are devoted to the education of their children and come to recognise themselves as educational practitioners. This happens because, by virtue of the parents themselves devising the styles of education, the parents are negotiating the meaning and the practice of their educational activities. This linking of meaning and action is tremendously powerful. The involvement of the parent at an active, creative, subjective level with the objective practice of educating their children engages the identity of the parent in a highly significant way. Parents begin to strongly identify themselves as home educators, and this permeates the whole of their lives.

Recognising that the content of the joint enterprise and the degree of conscious articulation could reflect differing strengths of identification is another extension of Wenger's (1998) theoretical framework, allowing it to cope with and analyse these. Home educating parents tend to be articulate about and conscious of their acquired identity as home educators. It is not clear from this study whether being conscious of one's identity provides evidence of a stronger identification than is the case with those who are not conscious of their identification but it adds a notable dimension. Further research is needed here.



The third research question, concerning the nature of the relationship between the individual home educating parent and the wider world, can be addressed through a key feature which informs identity for home educating parents, marginality. By finding themselves in a minority group which is acting outside of established social practices and by pursuing an activity that implicitly criticises a respected social institution, parents join the ranks of the marginalised.

It might be thought that there is a 'typical' type of home educating family, a family that is 'alternative' and has rejected several aspects of mainstream society. But this is not the whole picture as in fact there is a broad diversity in the type of families who home educate. Families come from many walks and styles of life, especially those who come to home education after dissatisfaction with their children's school experiences. Some are 'alternative' and some include members of respected mainstream professions such as classical music, academia and law. The participants in this small study also exemplified a wide variety of families; some had one child and some had more, single mothers and same sex couples, some lived in the country and some in major cities and there were representatives from many economic sections of society. There was also a wide mixture of educational styles adopted, from following a professional curriculum to allowing the children complete determination over their own education. Further, families had different reasons for home educating from problems at school to ideological convictions held before the children were born. There is, it seems, a broad

diversity of families choosing to home educate in a variety of ways for different reasons.

Parents may feel marginalised because they have to repeatedly explain and defend their decision to home educate to family, friends and neighbours. This choice may also have to be defended to public officials such as doctors.

Being out of step with societal expectations can also be stressful when, for example, parents worry about being out in public during school time due to possible harassment by truancy officers. Moreover, having no blueprints or well worn paths for parents to follow, insecurity ensues and adds to the stress of having to make decisions on one's own and having no-one with who to share the problems encountered in home educating. The disadvantages and trials of home educating can still contribute to the strength of identification with the practice by raising the emotional temperature and stakes involved in the commitment suggesting that marginality also has positive consequences.

Being marginal can benefit parents by enabling them to see themselves as taking a vital area of their lives into their own hands and being self-determining. As there has been so little research with home educating parents, it was necessary to look to other marginal groups where research had been undertaken, such as lesbian mothers, families of children with special needs and the miners' wives during the strike of 1984-5, to see if any affects had been found. Here there was evidence of changes involved due to marginalisation such as a growth in politicisation. This manifested itself, in



this study, in parents becoming more assertive in their dealings with officials and becoming more cautious or sceptical about listening to professionals in other areas of their lives. For example, parents use each other or the internet as sources of information for both educational and non-educational matters such as medical advice. The practice of creating lives in a community of practice or constellation and the consequent discovery of who we are and what we can be through this practice, although sometimes frightening and painful, also realises human potential, can bring fulfilment and adds to the depth of parents' identification as home educators. The advantages and, as said, even the disadvantages of undertaking this marginal activity contribute to the strength of the identity of parents as home educators.

In sum, it is being argued that because home education is a marginal activity, parents are often questioned about their choice, which leads to them becoming more articulate about the decision, becoming aware of its drawbacks and benefits and carefully considering their choice of educational style; they consciously become educationalists. This has been achieved, as described, through a complicated mixture of learning through the activity of home education itself and reflection on their situation while belonging to a community of practice or constellation which shares their practice.

This study has highlighted the adaptability of parents and the flexibility of the home education context and provides examples of the wide variety and plasticity of family life and educational practices. Different people have different needs for self-fulfilment (Lewis, 1991) and can find self-



determination through meeting different challenges. This study also supports the view that there can be benefits to society through parents' life satisfaction that could result from supporting variations in family life and educational styles and from embracing broader definitions of work, family structure and educational approach which would acknowledge and include as valuable the work of child rearing and taking care of the home.

Home education also involves factors which, contrary to expectation, do not impinge significantly on parents' lives. The time demands of home educating are enormous and it would seem to involve parents sacrificing time for themselves in terms of hobbies, friendships or even work. And once one steps off a career ladder it can be difficult to get back on. The financial implications of home educating would also seem to be extensive. But while parents were affected by factors such as time for themselves, career and finances, the effects were so diverse that no generalisations were possible and most parents in this study found their own satisfactory ways to handle them.

This study also raised issues of parenting and gender equality. It appears that despite entering into an atypical life path with regard to their children's education, the dominant ideologies of motherhood and fatherhood and the consequences of these for everyday life, affect home educating parents in a fairly similar way to those in the wider society. For example, in society as a whole, the role of fathers in children's lives is uncertain (Welsh et al, 2004). As with fathers whose children go to school and who tend to be around the school less than mothers (Department for Education and Skills, 2003b),

home educating fathers seem to have less to do with their children than mothers. However, generally there is little data from home education research about fathers' role in home education and what research there is has not addressed this question specifically. This is another areas for possible future research.

Due to the exploratory nature of this project it has not been possible to analyse all the potential aspects of the theoretical framework, Communities of Practice. For example, neither why some home educators remain at the boundaries of the community of practice or never join nor the relationship of home education communities of practice to each other have not been analysed. The situation of parents who are long term home educators raises different questions to those that involve newcomers to home education or those that involve families who are not happy with the choice. These could be areas for further investigation for both the development of home education research and the development of the community of practice framework.

Another area touched on by this work which has potential for further research is the theory of informal learning. This 'style' of education has been called by many names: autonomous, child-led, learner-managed and, more in the academic establishment, informal learning (Thomas, 1998; Thomas and Pattison, 2008). This style of education adapts and develops to match the educational needs of the children and the family arrangements as the family grows in size and age. Although informal learning is difficult to define (Watkins and Marsick, 1992), Thomas and Pattison (2008) describe it as

involving learning through everyday life experiences without any prescribed topics. This description of informal learning is very close to the spirit of home education as it was described by the parents interviewed and close to Wenger's (1998) emphasis on lived practice.

We can now turn to the main research question, does the experience of long term home educating significantly affect parents, and if so, how?

While it might be the case that not everyone who home educates is deeply affected by the experience, all those who were interviewed for this study were. It is true that those who came forward to be interviewed for this study were self selecting and therefore the conclusion from this study cannot be extrapolated over the home educating population as a whole. But it can be said from this study that some parents who home educate can be significantly affected because they come into a situation where it is necessary for them to think about their children's education, what this means for them and their children and how it is to be practiced. In short they identify with the home education community or practice or constellation and become home educators.

The factors of responsibility for their children's education, putting this into practice in a way that suits the whole family and being marginal carry heavy emotional force; home education is not only an involving creative activity, it is also a risky venture. Parents who chose to home educate take on an enormously important activity in the face of possible social disapproval. It is



unsurprising then that for many parents home education provides the means for the construction and maintaining of a significant aspect of their identity.

These main factors at play in home education which influence identity (shared practice as educators of their children in a community of practice or constellation and marginalisation from the wider society) work together mutually producing and explaining each other. The members of the community of practice or constellation not only give the community concrete existence but also contribute ideas and commitment which keeps the community or constellation alive and growing, while at the same time, the community of practice or constellation provides safety and positive reinforcement which, for the members, makes the communality all the more important and meaningful.

The power of learning through one's life experiences, as some home educating parents do, and learning throughout one's life has long been recognised. It can begin with an individual's realisation that learning is a lifelong process (Stehlik, 2003) and goes on to be something that parents can provide for their children possibly without realising the implications for their own personal development when exercising self-determination in a social practice. Together, the emotional attachment to one's children, the marginal nature of home education and the resultant continual self-development of the parents, combine to make home education a life dominating force, constructing and maintaining part of the identity of its participants. Being a

home educator can be a powerful, challenging and deeply formative experience.



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## Appendices 1-12

### Appendix 1: A sample of publications in the last five years from the US about home education

Other publications are designed to help you continue home educating such as *The Complete Home Learning Source Book : The Essential Resource Guide for Homeschoolers, Parents, and Educators Covering Every Subject from Arithmetic to Zoology*, Rupp (2005) and The Ultimate Guide to Homeschooling (3rd Edition), Bell (2005). There are also numerous online curricula such as *Oak Meadow*, *Ambleside Curriculum* and *K12 Inc*. There are books to help parents create their own curricula such as *100 Top Picks For Homeschool Curriculum: Choosing The Right Curriculum And Approach For Your Child's Learning Style*, Duffy (2005) and The Ultimate Book of Homeschooling Ideas: 500+ Fun and Creative Learning Activities for Kids Ages 3-12, Dobson (2002). There are books to help parents gain entrance to university for their children such as Homeschooling High School: Planning Ahead for College Admission, Dennis (2004) and *Homeschooling for Success: How Parents Can Create a Superior Education for Their Child*, Kiyosaki and Kochenderfer (2002).

## **Appendix 2a: First set of Questionnaire Questions Answered by Ten Parents**

1. How old were your children when you began home educating?
2. How long have you been home educating?
3. Do you have one adult member of your household with the main responsibility for the home educating time? If so, is it you?
4. Do you have one breadwinner in your household? If so, is it you?
5. Can you tell me how you go about home educating?
6. What resources, if any, do you use?
7. What organizations, if any, do you belong to?
8. How do you find home education affects your own career?
9. How do you find home education affects your financial situation?
10. How do you find home education affects your personal interests?
11. How do you see yourself in fifteen years time?
12. What, if anything, have *you* learnt from home education?
13. May I contact you for more information?



**Appendix 2b: Second set of Questionnaire Questions answered by Forty Parents**

1. How old was/were your child/ren when you began home educating?
2. How long have you been home educating?
3. How is the responsibility for home educating divided between the adults?
4. Who is the main breadwinner in the family? Please tick  
You.....Your partner/Husband/Wife..... Shared.....
5. As you know, there are many different approaches to home education from the very formal (more like the school structure) to the autonomous home educator (less formal structure). Can you tell me how you go about home educating?
6. What resources do you use? Please tick as many as you would like.

Text Books	Neighbours
TV	Extended Family
Computer	Voluntary Work
Internet	Libraries
Local Classes	Adult Education Classes
Private teachers	Home Education Group
Jumble Sales	After School clubs
Religious Organisations	
Other.....	
7. What organisations, if any, do you belong to?
8. How far does your decision to home educate affect your financial situation?

9. How far does your decision to home educate affect your career?
10. How far does your decision to home educate affect your personal interests?
11. How far does your decision to home educate affect your social life?
12. What do you see yourself doing when you no longer have home educating responsibilities?
13. Finally, I would like to ask a deeper question that might require some reflection - How far has home education contributed or not to your own development as an individual e.g. your philosophy of life, thoughts about society and politics, the most important things in your life which make life worthwhile?
14. May I contact you for more information?



**TEXT CUT  
OFF IN  
ORIGINAL**

### Appendix 3: An Example of an Answered Questionnaire- First Version

#### Questionnaire for Long Term (over 3 Years) Home Educating Parents for Leslie Barson

1) How old were your child/ren when you began home educating? ☐

2) How long have you been home educating? 12 1/2 years (ie 8 school years)

3) Do you have one adult member of your household with the main responsibility for the home educating time? If so, is it you? Not officially, but practically the answer is probably yes.

4) Do you have one breadwinner in your household? If so, is it you? Not at the moment, but that will probably change.

5) Can you tell me how you go about home educating? We do whatever the children want to do - currently, a limited number of regular activities (ice-skating, book club) + reading lessons with younger children + French + mythology with older child. Mainly, we do nothing specifically "educational" but we talk to them a lot.

6) What resources, if any, do you use?

Anything + everything - life! (especially internet!)

7) What organisations, if any, do you belong to?

HEAS

8) How do you find home based education affects your own career?

When I do work (not currently) I do so part-time so does my husband.



9) How do you find home based education affects your financial situation?

I suppose it halves our income, but never think about it like that! Even if we didn't have children, we'd probably consider life too short to work the whole time!

10) How do you find home based education affects your personal interests?

If anything, has enhanced my opportunities eg I get interested in what interests the children as well, keep my own interests. My children are very self-sufficient, so personal time isn't an issue now that they're older.

11) Do you think your relationship with your children has changed because you are home educating? If so, how?

N/A - always have. I can't imagine what it would be like to not always have them around.

12) How do you see yourself in fifteen years time?

I don't, unimaginable, but I assume ~~that~~ <sup>my</sup> I will follow a natural progression + that we'll move on from living with our children + feel fine about it.

13) What, if anything, have you learnt anything from home based education?

That, as a rule, it's easy + the natural thing to do! That knowledge flows from everywhere. That children seem to have an innate sense of Maths + probably shouldn't learn any formally until quite old, unless they particularly want to go so.

14) Can I contact you again for more information?

Yes



**An Example of an Answered Questionnaire – Second Version**  
**Questionnaire for Long Term (over 3 Years) Home Educating Parents for Leslie**  
**Barson**

1) How old was/were your child/ren when you began home educating?

Eldest - 6½ years

2) How long have you been home educating?

4 years

3) How is the responsibility for home educating in your home divided between the adults? Mainly mother 80%, father 20%

4) Who is the main breadwinner in the family? Please tick

You..... Your ~~partner~~/husband/wife..... Shared..✓.....

5) As you know, there are many different approaches to home based education from the very formal (more like school structure) to the autonomous home educator (less formal structure). Can you tell me how you go about home educating?

I'd like to use a completely autonomous approach but I do not feel entirely comfortable with that because the children seem to spend a lot of time playing computer games, watching TV and generally pottering and not doing anything that I would call particularly constructive. (I know that my interpretation of constructive is not necessarily an appropriate one).

6) What resources do you use? Please tick as many as you would like;

Text books✓	Neighbours
TV✓	Extended family✓
Computer✓	Voluntary work
Internet✓	Libraries✓
College	Adult education classes
Local classes for music✓	Home education support group✓
Private teachers	After school clubs
Book shops✓	Second hand shops
Jumble sales✓	Religious organisation

Other.....

7) What organisations, if any do you belong to?

Education Otherwise

HEAS



8) How far has your decision to home educate affected your financial situation?

Not much at the moment because I still have a child who is under school age so I would be at home with her even if the other two were at school.

9) How has home based education affected your career?

Same answer as above. It ~~will~~ will have an effect when the youngest is school age because I would then be able to work more.

10) In what way has home education affected your personal interests?

A lot. I don't get much time at all to do the things I like to do.

11) In what way has home based education affected your social life?

It's improved it, in that I see a lot of other home-educating parents. However, I do see less of my other friends.

12) Do you think your relationship with your children has changed because you are home educating? Please explain.

Yes. I think we are closer in general. I also expect more of them in contributing to family life (& chores).

13) What do you see yourself doing when you no longer have home educating responsibilities?

Reading a lot. Following up my own interests more.

14) Finally, I would like to ask a deeper question that might require some reflection- How far has home based education contributed or not to your development as an individual e.g. your philosophy on life, society, politics, the most important things in your life which make life worthwhile?

I think I am less driven and see the value in concentrating on the present. It is a very on-going process which changes & moves on all the time, so it is hard to put into words.

I think I have become more reactionary & very cynical about the accepted educational process, since I have been shown, by my children, how much they are capable of learning with a very small amount of active teaching on my part. Their learning is definitely their own and has little to do with me really - quite a humbling realisation.

I also realise how few of the important things in life are taught in school and how much emphasis can be put on them at home. e.g. spiritual development, assertiveness, cooking, caring for others, managing money, to name a few.

15) Can I contact you again for more information?

Name.

... Phone..

16) Would you be willing to be part of a more in depth personal interview at your convenience?

Yes.



**Appendix 4: Summary of Questionnaire Results**

This is an analysis of both sets of questionnaire questions. The first seven questions provide background information and highlight some of the problems in studying the home education community. The numbering of the questions is slightly different in the two versions of the questionnaire. To make this clearer I have numbered each question twice. The first number refers to the first questionnaire and the second number (in bold) to the second questionnaire. Where there is only one number, that question was only asked on one of the questionnaires.

HE = home education

	Birth – 3 years	4-6 years	7 years and above
1. 1.How old were your child/ren when you began home educating?	60%	44%	18%

It is notable that many parents stated that education starts at birth or by the age of three. The small number of older children suggests that the families answering the questionnaire may under-represent the number of children withdrawn from school.

	3-6 years	7-10 years	11 years and over
2.2. How long have you been home educating?	26%	36%	38%

	Mainly Mother	Mainly Father	Shared
3. 3.How is the responsibility for home education divided between the adults? (out of 40)	70%	2%	8%

	Mother	Father	Shared
4. 4. Who is the main breadwinner in your family?	10%	72%	18%

	1-3	4-6	7-10
<b>5. 5.</b> Your approach to HE? 1=formal 10= informal	12%	6%	72%

These results are very difficult to interpret and may reflect the problem of trying to categorise home educators' educational style. One of the main difficulties for research into home education is that there is no central doctrine which home educators follow. They can do what suits them best and this changes over time as their families change and grow older. Their answers reflect this.

	1-8	9-12	13 and over
<b>6. 6.</b> Number of resources used	14%	60%	26%

The most common resources, with over thirty families mentioning them, were textbooks, television, libraries, home education neighbourhood support groups and second hand shops. Most common, with over twenty-five families saying they use them; were computers, internet, and bookshops. Over ten families mentioned local classes, private teachers, neighbours and extended family and over five families said they used friends, college, voluntary work, adult education classes, after school clubs, religious organisations, hobby clubs (such as astronomy) videos and museums. There were numerous other resources mentioned individually such as the beach, penpals, radio, part time job, local events, theatres, allotment and bus and rail stations.

	None	One	Two of more
<b>7.7.</b> Number of HE organisations you belong to	18%	56%	26%

- The next six questions all relate to different areas of home educating parents' lives that might be thought to be affected by home educating.

	1-3	4-6	7-10
<b>9. 8.</b> How has home education affected your financial situation? 1= Better off 10= Worse off 5= No change	2%	52%	46%



These results were not conclusive. Although 46% said home education badly affected their finances, 52% said there was no or little affect. Of those who said they were badly effected many said they did not mind this situation.

	1-3	4-6	7-10
8. 9.How has HE affected your career? 1= Better off 10= Worse off 5= No change	18%	58%	22%

With regard to career, although a significant proportion feel home education has badly affected their career, an almost equally proportion feel it has helped their career or presented an area in which they may find a new career

	1-3	4-6	7-10
10. 10.How has HE affected your personal interests? 1= Better off 10= Worse off 5= No change	48%	18%	14%

Most felt that home education had either not changed their situation with regard to personal interests or had expanded their interests

	1-3	4-6	7-10
11. How has HE affected your social life? 1= Better off 10= Worse off 5= No change	38%	48%	2%

Most parents felt their social life had not changed or was enhanced since they began to home educate. Many stated that their social life occurred mainly with the children around.

The next two questions are multiple checked.

	Somethin g For Self	Make Mone y for Self	Grand -child- ren	Study- ing	Voluntar y Work	Work for Home Educa- tion	Don't know
11. 12. What do you see yourself doing in fifteen years/ when you no longer have home educating responsibilitie s? TICK ANY THAT APPLY	44%	28%	16%	16%	12%	8%	16%

	A	B	C	D	E
12. 13. What, if anything, have you learnt from HE?/ How, if at all, has HE contributed to you development?					
A = politicised/questioning B= no change C = more open and aware D = Don't know E = Adverse change	46%	8%	72%	2%	2%

This question is central to this study as it directly asks parents to say how much home education has affected their lives at a deeper level. A large percentage of parents said the experience of home education had made them more cynical, political, less pliant and less likely to follow others. They had become more shrewd, less likely to take things at face value and more likely to question professionals and experts, finding out the information for themselves. But it is difficult to probe these issues in a questionnaire with one question. This is where the in depth interviews were much more enlightening.



# Appendix 5: Table of the Two Groups of Interview Participants

Table 1: First Nineteen Parents Interviewed

Name	Marriage Status	Tertiary Educational History	Sex of Children and Number	When began home educating
1. Dinah	Married	Degree	2 girls	CSA (compulsory school age)
2. Sue	Married	None	2 girls	CSA
3. Hannah	Married	Teacher training	4 girls	Eldest child several years at school
4. *Lisa Couples are marked with identical symbols	Married	Degree	2 boys	Eldest 1 yr school
5.*Michael	Married	Degree	2 boys	Eldest 1 yr school
6. Maria	Married	Degree	2 girls 1 boy	Eldest 2 years at school
7. Martha	Divorced	None	2 girls	Children 1 and 12 years when left school
8. Rosheen	Married	None	1 girl	CSA
9. Alice	Married	Degrees	4 girls	CSA
10. Lyn	Married	Degrees	1 girl 1 boy	CSA
11. ^Jane	Divorced. Now with Sally	Nurse	4 girls	CSA
12. ^Sally	With Jane	Nurse	2 girls	CSA
13. Lucia	Divorced		1 girl 1 boy	CSA
14. Wendy	Married	Degree	1 girl 3 boys	Eldest 2 years at school
15. "Beth	Married	Degree	2 girls 2 boy	CSA
16. "John	Married	Degree	2 girls 2 boys	CSA
17. Sarah	Married	None	2 boys	Eldest age 10 when left school
18. Linda	Married	Degree	1 girl 1 boy	CSA
19. Dee	Married	Degree	4 boys	Eldest 1 yr at school

Where from	Where interviewed	How interviewed	How contacted	Work Status at time of interview <sup>1</sup>
1. US	UK	At home <sup>2</sup>	National HE contact List	N/W
2. US	US	At home	National HE contact List	P/T
3. UK	UK	At home	National HE contact List	N/W
4. US	US	Phone <sup>3</sup>	National HE contact List	N/W
5. US	US	Phone	National HE contact List	F/T
6. US	US	At home	National HE contact List	P/T
7. US	US	At home	National HE contact List	F/T
8. UK	UK	At home	National HE contact List	N/W
9. US	US	At home	National HE contact List	P/T
10. US	US	Restaurant	National HE contact List	P/T
11. UK	UK	Swimming baths	National HE contact List	P/T
12. UK	UK	Swimming baths	National HE contact List	F/T
13. UK	UK	Swimming baths	National HE contact List	N/W
14. US	US	Phone	National HE contact List	N/W
15. US	UK	My home	National HE contact List	P/T
16. US	UK	My home	National HE contact List	F/T
17. UK	UK	At home	National HE contact List	N/W
18. UK	UK	At Sarah's home	National HE contact List	P/T
19. US	US	At home	National HE contact List	N/W

<sup>1</sup> F/T = in full time work P/T= in part time work N/W= not in paid work

<sup>2</sup> 'At home' refers to an interview conducted in the interviewee's home.



Table 2: Second Fifteen Parents Interviewed

Name	Marriage Status	Educational History	Sex and Number of children	When began home educating
1. Sophie	Married	Degree	1 girl 1 boy	CSA Eldest
2. Maggie	Married	Degree	2 boys	several years at school
3. Jennifer	Partner	None	2 girls 1 boy	Eldest 1 year at school
4. Finolla	Married	None	1 girl 2 boys	Eldest 1 year at school
5. Annie	Single	None	3 boys	CSA
6. Charlotte	Divorced	Degree	1 girl 2 boys	Eldest and middle several years at school
7. Jill	Married	Nurse	2 girls 1 boy	All spent some time in school
8. Jackie	Divorced	None	2 girls 1 boy	Eldest and middle several years at school
9. Cathy	Married	Degree	3 children <sup>1</sup>	CSA
10. Miriam	Married	None	7 children	Eldest 1 year at school
11. Joan	Married	Degree	4 children	Eldest 2 several years at school
12. Cynthia	Partner	None	2 girls	CSA
13. @Alona	Married	Vocational College	2 boys	Eldest several years at school
14. @Peter	Married	None	2 boys	Eldest several years at school
15. Ruth	Married	Degree	3 girls 1 boy	

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<sup>1</sup> Parents did not always tell me the sex of their children and I did not ask. If I do not know the sex of the children I have written the number of children.

Where from	Where interviewed	How Interviewed	How Contacted	Work Status at time of interview
1. US	UK	Phone	Newsletter/ Internet List	P/T
2. UK	UK	At Home	Newsletter/ Internet List	P/T
3. UK	UK	Phone	Newsletter/ Internet List	N/W
4. UK	UK	Phone	Newsletter/ Internet List	N/W
5. UK	UK	Phone	Newsletter/ Internet List	N/W
6. UK	UK	Phone	Newsletter/ Internet List	N/W
7. UK	UK	Phone	Newsletter/ Internet List	P/T
8. UK	UK	Phone	Newsletter/ Internet List	N/W
9. UK	UK	Phone	Newsletter/ Internet List	P/T
10. UK	UK	Phone	Newsletter/ Internet List	N/W
11. UK	UK	Phone	Newsletter/ Internet List	N/W
12. UK	UK	Phone	Newsletter/ Internet List	N/W
13. UK	UK	At Home	Newsletter/ Internet List	N/W
14. UK	UK	At Home	Newsletter/ Internet List	F/T
15. UK	UK	At Home	Newsletter/ Internet List	N/W



## **Appendix 6a: First Set of Interview Questions**

1. Can you tell me about your background?
2. Can you tell me about your hopes for yourself as a young adult?
3. Questions about particular circumstances of home education: How did you find out about home education? How long have you been doing it? Why did you begin to home educate? How do you home educate?
4. Did you have any expectations about home education when you first started?
5. How, if at all, has it affected your life in the following areas:
  - a) Financial circumstances
  - b) Career/Work
  - c) Friends/Social life
  - d) Time for yourself
  - e) Personal interests
6. What do you think about education: learning style? Changed views?
7. What do you see yourself doing when your home education responsibilities have ended?
8. Do you think home education has changed how you think about life in general?

## **Appendix 6b: Added Interviews Questions**

9. How would you describe yourself?

10. What does this mean to you?

11. Is there anything you would change if you had the time over again?



## **Appendix 7: A More Detailed Analysis of the Background Situations of the Interviewees**

Of the thirty-four parents interviewed, four were couples (three were heterosexual and one lesbian) and seven were single parents. The number of children in each family ranged from one to seven. Thirty-one were women and three were men. Thirteen of the thirty-four parents were from America. Of these, two American mothers lived in England permanently and one couple was visiting England when they were interviewed. The other nine parents were interviewed in America. Twenty eight parents were married. Six of the parents interviewed were husband and wife. Six mothers were single. One of these mothers was in the process of a divorce and home education was a point of contention between the parents. There were eighty-seven children from the thirty families in this sample. One family has one child, fourteen families have two children, seven families have three children, seven families have four children and one family has seven children.

It is very difficult to accurately determine the age at which the children began home educating as is it not clear what age counts as 'school-age'.

The legal age for school attendance in the UK is five to sixteen but many schools require attendance before five years old, in order to be considered for a place at five. Some children in the families I interviewed attended alternative nurseries or schools for some time. For example, Dinah's eldest daughter never went to ordinary school but did attend an alternative school for a few days a week. That school allowed home educators to join in their activities when they wanted to. To what extent this counts as 'going to school'

is difficult to determine. Because the parents decided to home educate their children before their children reached 'school age' and because she went to this establishment by choice, this child will be counted as a home educated child.

Of the thirty families, eight families (thirty-three children) began home education without sending their children to school. Twenty-two families began to home educate after they found a problem with their eldest at school. It is difficult to say how long each child has been home educating. For example, Finolla's children went into school having already been home educating for some time and came out again.

Of the thirty-four parents, sixteen have a first degree at university. Three have a further degree. Four are qualified teachers. Eight parents were educated to secondary school level.

Of the twenty-one parents from the UK, thirteen did not have any education higher than secondary school. Several parents had dropped out of university or teacher training due to family pressures. This may be a matter of the difference in education systems between the US and the UK in that a lower proportion of the population attends university in the UK than in the US. Three parents from the US attended alternative high schools and one of these went on to an alternative university.



The three fathers interviewed work full time in paid employment. Their wives are the main home educators. One parent in the lesbian couple also works full time. She is not the biological mother of the children. Of the thirty-one mothers interviewed, eleven work part time in paid employment. Twenty mothers did not work in any paid employment.

The question of one parent being more positive toward home education than the other was not asked of the parents but some volunteered information about this. It is interesting to note that in nine families one parent was more positive toward home education at the beginning than the other. In seven cases this was the mother and in two it was the father. In eight of these families the parent who had doubts to begin with was now convinced it was a good thing. One family were in the middle of a divorce and the father was tolerating home education although he had yet to be convinced of its positive effect.

The main reason for home educating mentioned by twenty-one families was that their children were unhappy at school. Akin to this, other specific issues were mentioned such as getting away from bad influences at school, schools taking over the family's life, high school being too big and alternative schools too small. Among the families who never sent their children to school, parents mentioned issues such as that home education fitted their ideas of childhood, home education was a natural extension of their children's upbringing and it felt right for the child.

There were other relevant issues raised for individual families such as one parent having had a very bad time at school herself and being anxious for this not to be repeated by her children. Another parent had tutored her learning disabled brother from a young age. She found that she was good at that and had developed unconventional ideas about education from this experience.

Of the thirty families, four mentioned in passing that religion was a part of their lives. One family in the UK home educated in order to follow a Christian curriculum. Another family in the UK worked in their religious building although they did not follow a religious curriculum.



**Not all the views expressed by interviewees are respresented on these pages**

## Appendix 8:

### Example of part of one matrix used to collate the data from the interviews – First 19 interviews

Career	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
Shorthand of topics mentioned:																			
Not missing out	x			x	x	x	x								x				x
Career aspirations fulfilled by HE																			
Not giving up a career	x			x	x	x	x								x				
Always done creative work									x	x									
Never been out of work: P/t at home		x					x	x											
Works P/T in own business															x				
No career before children								x			x	x							
Had career before children																			
Career with children																			
Want to be role model and work													x						
Able to fulfill career ambitions thru HE					x		x	x											x
Avoiding decision on career	x																		
Couldn't work 9-5									x	x									
Money not a goal																			
Etc.... 17 more topics														x	x				271





**Appendix 9: Summary of Interview Analyses**

Below is an impressionistic analysis of both sets of interviews indicating only general trends from the interviews. The questions were very broad and open ended and the results was so various that the data was not easy to summarise. Because of this these tables can only give a rough indication of the results. Despite this it was thought that this sketch of the results was worth while as it can give readers an overview of the interviewees' answers and an idea of the general thrust of the responses.

Not all the questions asked have been summarised here. This is because either the answers are already outlined, for example, the parents' backgrounds in Appendix 5 and 7 or the answers were too individualised to be summarised in a table, for example, the answers to question 2 'can you tell me about your hopes for yourself as a young adult?' and question 10, 'what do you mean by your description of yourself?'.

As with the questionnaires the answers were grouped in order to be quickly and easily understood.

	Don't know	Some - varied	School- like
4. Did you have any expectations about home education when you first started?	12%	10%	78%

	Badly	Badly but don't mind	Not affected	Better Off
5a. How did home education affect your financial situation?	32%	15%	38%	15%

	Missing Out	Career thru/in home education	Not affected
5b. How did home education affect your career or work?	22%	22%	56%

	Badly	No change	Friends mostly home educators	Friends-home educators and non home educators
5c . How did home education affect your friends or social life?	21%	18%	34%	27%

	Badly	No change	Affected but able to find time
5d. How did home education affect your time for yourself?	32%	18%	50%

	Badly	No change	Home education stimulates new interests
5e. How did home education affect your personal Interests?	21%	29%	50%



	No change	Change
6. Change in view on education?	10%	90%

For an account of the styles of education described by parents see Appendix 11,

	Variety of jobs for money	Travel or unpaid creative jobs	Same as now	Don't know
7. Future?	32%	30%	26%	12%

	Confirmed what thought	Changed
8. Has home education changed how you think about life in general?	30%	70%

This is a very difficult question to quantify simply as parents had changed in so many ways about so many different issues that the quantitative description does not reveal the qualitative variety. I had to judge and balance on the basis of the data what could be a reasonable depiction of the situation.

Questions 9-11 were only asked to the last fifteen interviewees.

	Home Educator important part of description
9. How would you describe yourself?	100%

	No	Yes – not send children to school	
11. Is there anything you would change if you had time over again?	90%	10%	

## **Appendix 10: An Example of a 'New Member' Letter**

It has been made anonymous.

Dear

I am writing to welcome you to Education Otherwise (EO) and to introduce myself as your local contact. I would also like to tell you about Home Educators Network which is a network of home educating families throughout XX who meet regularly for social and educational events.

I'm XX and I home educate my 3 [children] in XX near XX. My [children] have always been educated at home although they did try school for a couple of terms a few years ago at their own request. 2 of my [children] are diagnosed with ADHD.

I'm enclosing what I hope will be some useful information with a local slant to supplement and help you make the most of your new members pack. If I can help with anything from a chat to help finding legal advice, please contact me. I look forward to meeting you and wish you well in your decision to home educate.

Best wishes,

[Name of Contact]



**Appendix 11: A Schedule of Events for a Neighbourhood Home Education Group**

This has been edited for reasons of confidentiality.

**HOME EDUCATORS'**  
**SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITIES**  
**(in [SEVERAL NORTHERN BRITISH CITIES])**  
**September**  
(Last updated 00/00/0000)

Dates for activities	Activities planned and coordinator ( )
Monday 6 <sup>th</sup> September	12noon - 3.00pm Weekly Meeting @ Training Centre
Wednesday 8 <sup>th</sup> September	11.30am(ish) Swimming @ Sports Centre 12noon – 1.00pm Group 1 Gym Lesson @ Gym, 1.30pm - 4.00pm Wednesday Club @ Room 9, Centre,
Thursday 9 <sup>th</sup> September	11.30am "Picnic in the Park" @ Park 1.00pm - 3.00pm Art Workshop - "Sketch Book Design" @ Art Gallery
Friday 10 <sup>th</sup> September	11.00am – 3.30pm Monthly Meeting @ Room 9, Centre <i>No Ice Skating</i>
Monday 13 <sup>th</sup> September	11.00am - 12noon Ten-pin Bowling @ Hollywood Bowl <i>No Weekly Meeting</i>
Wednesday 15 <sup>th</sup> September	11.30am(ish) Swimming @Sports Centre 12noon – 1.00pm Group 2 Gym Lesson @ Gym 1.30pm - 4.00pm Wednesday Club @ Room 9, Centre,
Friday 17 <sup>th</sup> September	11.00am onwards General Skating @ Ice Rink 1.00pm - 2.00pm Babysitters' Training Programme @ Central Library
Monday 20 <sup>th</sup> September	<i>No Weekly Meeting</i>
Tuesday 21 <sup>st</sup> September	9.00am Trip to [Theme Park] - coach arranged from
Wednesday 22 <sup>nd</sup> September	11.30am(ish) Swimming @ Sports Centre 12noon – 1.00pm Group 1 Gym Lesson @ Gym 1.30pm - 4.00pm Wednesday Club @ Room 9, Centre
Thursday 23 <sup>rd</sup> September	10.15am - 12.15pm Art Workshop - "Window Hangings" @ Art Gallery

<b>Friday 24<sup>th</sup> September</b>	<b>11.00am onwards</b> General Skating @ Ice Rink <b>1.00pm - 3.00pm</b> Music Session @ Village Hall
<b>Monday 27<sup>th</sup> September</b>	<b>10.30am - 11.30am</b> Ten-pin Bowling @ Hollywood Bowl, <i>No Weekly Meeting</i>
<b>Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> September</b>	<b>11.30am(ish)</b> Swimming @ Sports Centre <b>12noon – 1.00pm</b> Group 2 Gym Lesson @ Gym, <b>1.30pm - 4.00pm</b> Wednesday Club @ Room 9, Centre
<b>Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> September</b>	<b>11.30am - 1.30pm</b> Monthly Meeting @ Civic Centre

**Please contact the coordinator if you require any further information regarding an activity:**

<b>Contact Names</b>	<b>Contact Telephone Numbers</b>	<b>E-mail address</b>
-----	-----	-----
-----	-----	-----
-----	-----	-----
-----	-----	-----
-----	-----	-----
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# **HOME EDUCATORS'** **WEDNESDAY GYM LESSON**

(Last updated 1/3/04)

- **WHERE?** – XXX Road, XXX Town.
- **WHEN?** – Every Wednesday 12pm – 1pm (not during local school holidays due to the Coach usually having other holiday work commitments).
- **HOW MUCH?** - First session FREE, next three sessions £2.50 per child (£2.00 if three or more children) and £1.50 per child thereafter for all subsequent sessions. An additional £1.00 per child is payable to the gym complex each week for entry into the complex and insurance purposes.
- **WHO DOES IT?** - A qualified Gymnastics Club Coach (also qualified in disability gymnastics coaching).
- **WHO CAN COME?** - All ages and abilities welcome.
- **WHAT IS IT LIKE?** – After an initial warm up, the children are shown how to use different gym equipment and then allowed to take turns to practice the skill to their individual ability. The gym is equipped with full adult-sized equipment such as a trampoline, parallel bars, beams, horizontal bar and spring boards. The session is fully coach directed at the request of the complex to ensure the safety of the children in such an environment.
- **HOW DO I GET THERE?** - The gym is accessible by both Public Transport and by car. There is free car parking available at the site. If you require more details regarding this, please contact.....

**WE LOOK FORWARD TO SEEING YOU!**

**For more information about the Group, please call .....**

Home Educators' Activity: ICE SKATING

Venue: ICE ARENA, XXX Town

Day: EVERY FRIDAY (except the 2<sup>nd</sup> Friday in the month)

Time: 11.00am onwards

Age: ALL AGES although very young children will need close adult supervision

Cost: Child - £1.60 (school rate) *This is a new rate from September 2004.*

Under 5's - FREE admission but a charge of £1.20 is made for skate hire\*.  
Adult - £2.60

(\*Starting skate size is 6 and a half)

It is recommended that gloves/mittens, warm clothes and an extra pair of socks are worn. Hats and scarves are prohibited for safety reasons. Please see a more comprehensive list of Rules outlined by the Ice Arena in the entrance foyer by the Box Office.

Refreshments and light snacks are available in the Ice Arena's Café and a number of our group congregates there for lunch at around 12.00pm - 12.30pm to enjoy a drink, some chips and a general chat! If you prefer, it is possible to bring your own packed lunch and eat it in the spectators' area. The Ice Arena has a notice requesting that customers do not consume their own food in the Café.

This current skating session will finish for the "school holidays" on **16<sup>th</sup> July** and resume on the **17<sup>th</sup> September**.

For further information regarding Skating, please contact .....  
Home Educators' Activity: "CHARLOTTE'S WEB"  
Venue: THE THEATRE,  
Date: THURSDAY 8<sup>TH</sup> JULY  
Time: 1.30PM  
Cost of stalls tickets for a  
Group of 10 or more children: £5.00 per child (3 to 16 years of age)  
£8.50 per adult  
Age range: 5 and upwards

If anyone is interested in coming to this performance, please contact  
.....



## **Appendix 12: A More Detailed Outline of the Model of Education Interviewees Described**

The specific meaning of education that these home educating parents have negotiated can be seen from the detailed and lengthy descriptions and explanations they gave in the interviews, of the education style they had adopted. Some of these were strikingly similar that it has been included here at some length.

### **Learner-led learning**

Some parents talked about how they leave it up to the children entirely to decide what they learn. Jackie described her style of education as “just basically going with whatever they want to do. Not trying to push them to do anything” (7.2004). That she felt this method was successful was shown by her comment: “My six year olds just taught himself to read with no help from me. Just by me reading books to him. He’s really proud of that, that he’s taught himself”(7.2004).

Annie agreed:

As they’re all so different it becomes really obvious, I mean I’ve got twins and it becomes really obvious even with them, in the same environment, that they learn in totally different ways. It’s quite an eye opener I think and it’s an ongoing one (7.2004).

Sarah talked about letting the children set the agenda for their education.

Sarah did this by purposely not reading anything about ‘how to’ home

educate but letting her children tell her what they wanted: “my way was to learn along with my children. I deliberately didn’t read books about it at the start as I wanted to do what felt right” (4.2000). In this way not only did she learn information and skills with them, she also learnt what style of education her children felt comfortable with.

### **No set time or place**

Several parents mentioned that education happens anywhere and at any time so there is no need to set up any special educational activities. Jane said of her style of education: “They do what they want to do when they want to do it” (4.2000). Jackie agreed, saying: “Let them get on with whatever they want to do” (7.2004).

Wendy described a situation at her co-op that is a good example of how flexible the use of time can be. The father of one of the families in their home education co-op was badly injured and the other families in the co-op supported the family. She felt the flexibility involved in being able to drop everything and help this family was incalculably beneficial for both the children and the adults involved on an educational as well as a social level. Even Wendy’s more structured home education group was flexible enough to be able to dramatically change its emphasis to incorporate the shared values of the community of looking after members of the group that are in trouble.



### **Using a loose family-set curriculum**

Several parents emphasised that they were able to tailor their curriculum to suit their children's different educational preferences. Maggie said that her older child did not like set, structured work. However, her younger son liked having "some structured bits. We actually do Maths properly. We have a bag with all his maths books in. He actually likes doing maths and stuff" (7.2004).

Sue agreed, saying her two children were very different from each other: "my eldest daughter, she likes the academic work and I have another one just hates everything that you could think of that's academic but is very intelligent" (7.2000).

Hannah found the same with her four children:

having four children you see they all develop in different stages in different ways...The youngest is brilliant with her hands and the third doesn't want to know, she's all head knowledge and they've had the same sort of upbringing and they're just very different (7.1999).

Miriam, with seven children, described teaching her eldest child to read at four and then changed her own educational style to follow her other children's different learning schedules. From her third child on, they did not read until they were much older. She said: "whereas my sixth one now, he wants to learn to read.... I actually started teaching him and he's four. I do it when he

wants. He asks me” (8.2004). She has varied her style of education to suit each child, teaching them a skill when they ask to learn it and by means and methods appropriate to their situation. The lack of an externally set curriculum allows parents to incorporate and validate children’s differences into the informal educational setting.

The home education situation allows parents to vary their curriculum over time. Sophie exemplifies how her attitudes to curricula have changed over time. She said:

When they were very little they wanted basically whatever I wanted to do. I would suggest something and they would either say ‘yes let’s go with it’ or not (8.2004).

A benefit parents’ saw in having no professionally created curriculum was that their children were able to learn through being active in the world.

Dinah said:

They have a lot more opportunity to do things like look after their own money and open a bank account. Learning things like cooking and things about the house and organize their own trips and outings they’re learning by actually doing [rather] than the theory (4.2000).

Educational work can become meaningful for children and adults if they see it as ‘real’ work, that is, if they see it as work that achieves something, makes



a difference, however small, in the world outside the home as well as at home. Several parents, such as Maria and Sarah, commented on trying to find work that did this. Wendy found ways to make home education studies have more importance in the outside world. She said:

We're doing a big project where you work on a report on some large structure in your community and submit it and it's published on the web site. Now you're writing for a reason. You're writing to get published. You're writing for it to be building a big website. They have to write as engineers. There's a reason for doing that (8.2000).

In tailoring their curriculum to suit their child, a wide range of resources can be used; from traditional professionally created educational materials such as text books and museums, to wider ranging activities such as films and family outings.

### **Varied educational approaches**

A further beneficial factor parents noted was the variety and breadth of educational approaches they were able to use. Alona said her approach was very eclectic: "It's a mixture of everything. It just depends mainly on what they're after" (7.2004). Sarah talked about the umbrella of home education encompassing a wide range of possibilities: "Within 'HE' there's so much variability; so many approaches and options come under the home education umbrella" (4.2000). Alona sees learning as taking place all the time and at any time in a varied and active home life. She described their life to a friend:

A friend of mine asked me, how do you work the day? ...I said 'well, I don't know. It just depends what happens. It depends what happens when I get up in the morning and obviously there are some things the kids have to do. It depends because if I've got a film screening<sup>2</sup> at 10 o'clock then stuff the maths! We're going to go off and see the film. We'll worry about that when we get back. The same thing, like I might say 'stuff the maths! We're going to go to the science museum' (7.2004).

Many different educational approaches were spelled out by parents. For example, Ruth uses a mixed educational style of traditional resources and wider activities:

They keep a journal that they do every day... and that's it. Whether we started doing some workbooks then [in their early home education days] I'm not sure. I think we might have done. That was it really. I suppose we did. They had swimming lessons... (8.2004).

Joan also had a mixed educational approach using some traditional methods like exams and at other times following the children's interests, as long as they were doing something. Her emphasis is directed toward her children doing something that interests them and for which they take responsibility:

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<sup>2</sup> The 'film screening' Alona is referring to is run by Film Education which has free screenings of films and events for school aged children all over London throughout the year. See <http://www.filmeducation.org/aboutus.html>



Now my oldest is actually at school doing 'A' levels and my second oldest is going to school in September. They've done GCSEs from home and got good grades. With 'A' level, I think, with the subjects they wanted to do, I think it best for them that they went somewhere a bit more specialised. My ... nearly thirteen year old is about to start on GCSE courses through distance learning and that means she's going to have to have a timetable for herself. But she sets it herself. They set their timetable, they decide how much work they're going to do and because they've got a specific amount to do in a specific time frame, how they organise [themselves]. Their timetable's up to them really (4.2004).

Lisa also uses a professional curriculum but she changes it to suit her children. She said: "[I try] different things to see how they work. And what works best for the kids. What they like as well. We do work [with the family business] a few days a week so we're gone so we can't really do a 5-day a week 9-1 schedule. We fit it in" (8.2000). Lisa does not rigidly adhere to a professionally devised curriculum but uses it as a spring board for her children's education. Her point of reference for whether one curriculum is better than another is how her children feel about it.

Beth described some of her journey to coming to the educational approach that she felt suited her family.

They were young enough to just go away. You'd asked for the glue bottle to be opened and got the thing opened and other things were happening and you weren't interested and so you just went away. And that was basically the moment that I learned 'just answer the question'; don't do any more than that. Just answer the question. Well it took a while for that to really sink in on the verbal questions (9.1999).

For Beth 'just answering the question', giving the children the information they want, when they want it, is part of the family's changed educational approach.

No one way of educating children was correct for the families interviewed. The parents spent time and thought developing what they considered to suit their family's needs best and are able to take advantage, in different ways, of the fact that a professionally written curriculum is not necessary in home education. This means parents do not have to use one at all or can chose to use one of their choice and follow it exactly or pick and chose bits from one or more curricula (Bendall, 1985). The children's educational needs changed over time, which meant that parents' learning and teaching styles also had to change. For example, they might not use a set curriculum while their children are young but choose to use one later. The flexible structure of home education was ideally suited to this.



### **Role of conversation and appropriateness of response**

Conversation is an important vehicle for sharing thoughts, developing intimacies, making ideas explicit and working through problems (Jeffs and Smith, 2005). It is unpredictable, immediate and can have a life of its own. Many parents said that conversation played a big role in their educational package. For example, Linda said: "We chat a lot about what he's doing and where he's going" (4.2000).

The immediacy of conversation is an important part of its educational role, allowing 'dovetailing' (Thomas, 1994, 1998) that is, giving the relevant information needed at the time it is needed and not giving more than is appropriate. It is then taken in by the learner without further need of repetition. This is exemplified by Beth's story which she realised is a difficult area to explain and said it is best expressed with an example. She continued:

From when [my daughter and son] were particularly young, ...There was the time that they were working on some project and they couldn't get the glue bottle opened and I was working in the kitchen and they were just over in the corner and they came to me with the glue bottle that they wanted opened, and it took me a while and I asked them what the project was and started telling them how to do it, and then in seconds they were nowhere to be seen (9.1999).

Beth's inappropriate response to their project meant that she pushed the children away. She continued to speak about another time when she was able to put into practice what she had learnt from the first experience:

... [my daughter] came in and asked me a question, and I had been to school and I knew that lesson and I had just a brilliant reflection about the whole topic beyond the answer to the question. But I had learned [what] not to do with answering questions. So she asked her question and I answered her question very briefly, whatever it was. And then in my head I racked up the entire topic and came to a brilliant conclusion...(9.1999).

Beth feels that her traditional understanding of education prepared her to deliver a lecture on the topic her daughter had asked about but she chose not to, remembering how she drove her daughter away on the earlier occasion.

Beth again:

[My daughter] came to me with her next question, she had taken my answer and connected it to whatever she was thinking about, and she had her next question. And you know, it had nothing to do with my entire non-verbalised lecture frame. And so I answered her new question, and she was satisfied and ran away. I had time then to figure out how [my daughter] got from A to Z when B was obviously next



[step]. Once she was away I could think about how she got from the first to second. But what I did realise was that if I had been talking I would have interfered with any thinking that she might have been doing (9.1999).

Beth's daughter had taken a different path through the topic than her mother. That may be because she did not have the school experience of her mother, or it may be due to her particular circumstances such as her age, interests or experience. However, for whatever reason, Beth had learnt that there are many good ways to develop a topic. While the important lesson for her daughter was receiving the required information and assurance that her pursuit of the topic was worthwhile, for Beth the most important lesson was to allow her daughter to develop her own thought process.

This intimate portrayal by Beth of her educational relationship with her children can also help illustrate her continual negotiation of the joint enterprise of the home education community of practice. She intently listens to what her daughter needs beyond the words of the question. Beth is changing through her experience with her children what home education means for them and in this negotiation of the learning process she is also acknowledging that she herself has learned many lessons.

Maria consciously chose conversation as an educational tool. Their day involved work on the house and smallholding and 'conversation'. The

conversation would be around some items in the newspaper or a book that was read aloud to the whole family. She said:

So our loose structure would be to get up in the morning and do chores outdoors and then do household chores...and then we'd sit down and read together, and typically I'd find, everyone found an article or two in the newspaper and we'd read that together and then we'd look at periodicals and the eldest would read a novel...It could be anything, it could be anything really, you know we followed the war in Chechnya and the - I'm trying to think, the uprising, but a lot of international relations (8.2000).

However, even in this consciously educational situation Maria still sees her role as a facilitator to the children's conversation and she chooses not to direct the discussion:

...but I don't direct the discussion so much, I mean, I don't say, 'so what do you think of the...? ...I guess I go about it in a very unstructured way as if I were reading with you. You know, or my husband and I when we're together, and one of us would say 'wow, do you believe this' you know, it's just very, very loose (8.2000).

Another form of casual conversation that Maria felt was important for her children's education was the conversation she was able to have with her children as they engaged in activities together. She said that she felt that:



over the years we have done so much talking in the garden, and the quality of that time was more important, and even in the teenage years when the mother and daughter relationship is not always that easy.... When we get in the garden and we're just working there or reading or doing some mindless task, there's an opening, there's an opening up. (8.2000)

This shift by parents is evidence of negotiating the meaning of education. Through the experience of home education, parents have had to negotiate new meanings about what education is for them and how it is practiced.